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# What We're After

Kim Mohan

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In the new AMAZING® Stories, we want to be aggressive about breaking new ground. We want to push the envelope a little farther with every story we print and every issue we publish. We want stories that not only stand at the frontier of speculative fiction, but expand that frontier.

The ideal story for us is truly original, certifiably trend-setting, unmistakably unique. It is a story the likes of which no one has ever seen in print before. In subject matter, style, or presentation—or all three—it breaks through the old boundaries of the genre and defines new ones. If a manuscript doesn't have at least one new idea, one new method of telling the story, one new way of exciting the reader, it's probably not a story that we'd prefer to publish.

Those two paragraphs, taken from our Guidelines for Fiction Writers, serve as a good general description of What We're After. But because it's a *general* description, in some ways it doesn't sound all that different from what a lot of other magazines might say about themselves. What We're After is a topic that deserves to be expanded upon, so here goes.

## I. Subject matter

Perhaps the easiest way to attract our attention is to come up with a new idea—a subject or topic that's never been explored in a science fiction, fantasy, or horror story before. Most of the time when you finish reading a story in this magazine,

we want you to sit back and say to yourself, "I've never read a story quite like that one before." Usually when a story elicits that kind of reaction from the reader, it's because the story was based on or contained an original idea.

Of course, ideas come in a multitude of different sizes, so we (and you) have to be flexible when we judge a story on this basis. For instance, the fundamental topic of "A Tip on a Turtle" (from new issue #1) has been dealt with before; what makes "Turtle" different from other stories of the same general type is the way Robert Silverberg built a unique structure on that foundation. The same idea could have been used for a story set in a Las Vegas casino, or for a plot based on playing the stock market, and the story would have fallen flat because those settings are so predictable.

"Victoria" (from new issue #2) is unique and original on a larger scale. Paul Di Filippo starts by laying out an absolutely outlandish premise—but he does so in such a way that you're convinced that such a thing *could* be true. Then he goes on from there to develop a completely plausible plot that follows from that basic idea—working in a few other smaller-scale new ideas along the way.

At the other end of the spectrum of new ideas is the twist—the fine touch that makes a story just *that* much different from others to which it bears a basic similarity. "Time and

Again," in the issue you're holding, is that sort of story. We're sure that when Dan Perez sat down to write this story, he didn't think he was about to redefine the boundaries of the genre. What he did was to take a concept that has become rather basic in science fiction and explore another possible way in which that concept could affect and change the lives of his characters—a twist that, as far as we know, takes his story down a path that no other author has traveled before.

## II. Style

Most writers and readers know what that word means. The trouble is, you might have to ask a lot of people before you get two definitions that sound the same. I can think of several ways to use the term in the context of what I do for a living. But as it pertains to What We're After, style has to do with the method of telling a story.

For example, Gary Douglass is not the first author to do his own version of *The War of the Worlds*, nor will he be the last. But he chose to tell his story by emulating the characteristics of Mark Twain's writing—Mark Twain's *style*, if you will. The basic idea of "Extraterrestrial Life on the Mississippi" (from new issue #1) is not original, and the subject matter is not what made it an "amazing story." Even if you had a pretty good idea how the story was going to turn out, we hope you

(Continued on page 62)

# Reflections

## Robert Silverberg

---

Two news stories on consecutive pages of an issue of *The New York Times* last fall tell the whole story of the energy-impooverished future that we're shaping for ourselves for the twenty-first century.

The headline on the first one is:

### OIL CRISIS RENEWS FIGHT OVER PLANT IN SANTA BARBARA

"Symbol of Energy Clash," we learn in a subhead. "Pipeline and Tanker Proposals Meet Stiff Opposition of Environmental Groups."

What this one is about is the Gaviota Oil and Gas Plant, which was built by Chevron Oil—the biggest oil company in California—on a headland about thirty miles northwest of the pretty coastal town of Santa Barbara. Its purpose is to carry out preliminary refining of crude oil brought up from the huge Arguello oil field, which is situated about ten miles off the California coast. The Gaviota Oil and Gas Plant was completed in 1987 at a cost of \$2.5 billion—and has never gone into service. There it stands, unused. No oil is rising from the Arguello oil field, either—even though it contains more than 300 million barrels of recoverable reserves and could produce nearly 100,000 barrels of oil a day.

The reason that the idle Gaviota Oil and Gas Plant and the Arguello oil field with which it is associated came into the headlines last fall is that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait had

just taken place and once again the United States was threatened with the loss of much of the imported oil supply on which it is dependent. At that precarious time, it began to seem sensible to look around for such remaining domestic oil resources as might serve to keep our cars and engines running during the crisis. And there was the Arguello oil field down there in the Pacific, sleeping with the fishes just a few miles off shore.

Why has nothing been happening there?

For the answer to that question we have to go back to 1969, when a Union Oil drilling platform hit a blow-out and fouled the lovely beaches of Santa Barbara with tons of hideous black goo. That was a truly horrendous ecological disaster, and the area was years recovering from it. In one sense Santa Barbara has *never* recovered from it, because the terrible memory of those oil-clotted beaches continues to obsess the inhabitants of the city today. The whole oil industry is anathema to them. Let the oil and gas be produced somewhere else, they say. We have suffered enough to keep the cars of the nation running.

Understandable enough. But oil exploration did continue in the offshore waters—with due precautions to avoid a repetition of the 1969 calamity—and in 1981 the giant Arguello field was found. After intense debate the county supervisors allowed Chevron, in 1984, the right to construct a processing plant at

Gaviota. Oil and gas from the offshore drilling platforms would be carried by two buried pipelines to the Gaviota plant, which would separate gas, sulfur, propane, and other byproducts from it; the residue of the crude would be shipped by pipeline to a Chevron refinery in an industrial zone near Los Angeles for conversion into gasoline and fuel oil.

Forty-four different governmental agencies reviewed the plans for the plant. The county imposed 165 conditions, including the planting of a forest of eucalyptus and pepper trees to screen the plant from travelers driving past on nearby Highway 101. A butterfly habitat was given special protection. All the necessary approvals were given and the plant was built.

But not the pipeline to Los Angeles. Political opposition sprang up all along the 120-mile route, and Chevron was unable to get permission to construct the line. So it asked to be allowed to ship the oil to Los Angeles by tanker. The county supervisors approved that request in the spring of 1989; but then a different regulatory body, the California Coastal Commission, killed the scheme by arguing that Chevron hadn't made adequate provisions for cleaning up possible new oil spills.

So there things sit. A Santa Barbara group called Get Oil Out argues that we don't need the oil in the first place, but should simply cut down on our oil consumption by

driving less. The Santa Barbara county supervisors have suggested that Chevron use a different and already existing pipeline, to which Chevron has replied that the Arguello oil is too heavy to ship that way and would have to be diluted with lighter oil, bringing the cost of shipping to \$5 a barrel—three times higher than it would be by tanker. The stalemate drags on and on. The Arguello oil remains in the sea. The owners of the unused Gavitoa plant pay \$3 million a month for its maintenance. And foreign dictators play political games with us because they know we are unable to provide for our own energy needs.

Now we turn the page. The headline here is:

STUDY OF THREE MILE ISLAND  
ACCIDENT FINDS NEGLIGIBLE  
INCREASE IN CANCERS

The Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident of 1979, you may recall, is the event that put an end to the nuclear power industry in the United States. Poor design and incompetent operational handling caused the Three Mile Island reactor to come close to meltdown; thousands of people fled in panic; many of them have lived in fear of radiation-caused cancer ever since.

A decade later, the cancers have failed to materialize. A review of the medical records of 100,000 people show some increase in leukemia among children, in lung cancer, and

in lymphoma in the region over the 11-year period, but nothing that seems statistically unusual, or that can't be attributed to other causes—the lung cancer in particular. So far, it seems as though the government prediction that the Three Mile Island accident would lead to at most *one* additional cancer death among those who had been within fifty miles of the nuclear plant is on the mark. As well it should be: the total radioactivity emitted within a five-mile radius of Three Mile Island during the 1979 event was less than .001 rems. Most of us absorb eight to ten times that much in the course of a year from natural radioactive emissions from our environments.

But Three Mile Island (and the subsequent Chernobyl catastrophe, the result of even shoddier design and worse mismanagement) have put what seems like a permanent end to the nuclear power industry here. Mostly we burn coal to get our electricity—with consequences in the form of particulate pollution and acid rain—along with some natural gas. In a few areas we use hydroelectric energy, which requires dams that destroy rivers and create vast silt flats. No new nuclear plant has been proposed in years.

Out of fear, we turn our backs on nuclear power. Out of a desire for environmental purity, we insist on guarantees of perfection before any oil can be lifted from our offshore fields. Meanwhile, of course, we

light our Christmas-tree ornaments, we drive six blocks to pick up a newspaper, we heat our homes to make ourselves cozy. What we want, apparently, is the environmental equivalent of a free lunch.

Our ancestors didn't have to worry about oil spills or nuclear disasters. They had a little problem with horse dung in the streets, of course, and those oil lamps required some pretty heavy harvesting of the whale population, but otherwise things weren't so bad, environmentally speaking. And they may not be for us, either, if some quick and lovely energy fix turns up next week, like feasible, cheap power from nuclear fusion. Meanwhile we make ourselves ever more beholden to far-off dictators every day, while constantly coming up with new and interesting ways to consume energy at home. And the twenty-first century, last time I looked, was less than ten years away.

—

On another subject entirely: I had a little book for young readers called *Letters From Atlantis* published last year. The publisher's catalog listing for it speaks of me as "the author of the *Dying Inside* and *Nightwings* series." Well, as I hope some of you know, each of those "series" was one book long. I suppose they're too new at the game to remember a time when science-fiction novels were written in single-book units. ♦

# EXCEPT MY LIFE, EXCEPT MY LIFE, EXCEPT MY LIFE

**JOHN MORRESSY**



Illustration by Hannah M. G. Shapero

Since the agency opened for business, I've worked out a mutually satisfactory division of labor among myself. I<sup>3</sup> manage the office, I<sup>1,2</sup> do the legwork, and I<sup>4</sup> take care of the deep thinking. So far, the system works.

It's not entirely the result of good organization. Cracking a couple of spectacular cases has helped a lot. Word got around that if you're having trouble with a clone or with the entertainment business—and especially with both combined—the Lucky Clover Detective Agency, Joe Kilborn sole owner and proprietor, is the place to go for help.

So I<sup>3</sup> wasn't surprised when Serena Siddons appeared in the office, pointed a finger at my<sup>3</sup> chest, and said, "I want you, Kilborn."

"A lot of people do, ma'am," I<sup>3</sup> said, rising. "It's been busy around here lately."

"I need you more than they do, and I can pay."

I<sup>3</sup> gave her a businesslike smile and waved her to a chair. When she had seated herself, she tossed back her great mane of silver hair and fixed her emerald eyes on me<sup>3</sup>, then took a slow look around the office. I<sup>3</sup> said, "I have me at a disadvantage, ma'am. I don't believe I know—"

"Don't play dumb, laddie. Everybody in this city knows me."

She was absolutely right, but I<sup>3</sup> make it a practice to be unimpressed by clients, even when I<sup>3</sup>'m impressed. Most of the people who walk into the office have enough ego to fill Central Park. Even so, this particular client would have impressed Napoleon.

"Would you by any chance be Serena Siddons?"

She flashed a smile as frosty as a January moonrise. "At a rough estimate, laddie, there are twenty thousand people in this city who *would* be Serena Siddons, if they could. I *am*."

I<sup>3</sup> had never seen her in person before. Serena Siddons was a legend, and she worked at keeping the legend alive and public. But she worked at it in very different circles from the ones I<sup>1,2,3</sup> moved in. She had been in the theater—"on Broadway" is what people called it then, and sometimes, just to confuse things, "off-Broadway" or even "off-off-Broadway"—back in the days of the old Times Square, when year after year, thirty or forty theaters regularly offered live drama and musicals. When live drama in this country went the way of black-and-white films and two-dimensional television, she organized an international touring company. After twenty-five years of touring, she took two years off to write her autobiography, then became a screenwriter and eventually director and producer of her own vehicles. Why she was here I<sup>3</sup> couldn't imagine, but it was a pretty safe bet that theater had something to do with it.

"I'm pleased to meet you," I<sup>3</sup> said. "What is it you'd like me to do?"

"I have an investment, Kilborn. I want it protected."

"What's the investment, ma'am?"

"You've heard of Three For The Show, I assume?"

"An acting group, isn't he?"

"The three finest actors I've ever seen, Kilborn. The best in the business today by far. Maybe the best ever."

"A clone, isn't he, ma'am?"

"Yes. Surely that doesn't bother you, Kilborn," she said, narrowing those chilly green eyes.

"Not a bit, ma'am. I'm just looking for the facts."

"I'll give you all the facts you want. You've heard of Count Proteus, too, I suppose?"

I<sup>3</sup> had to think for a minute. "He's an impressionist, isn't he?"

"You're a master of understatement, Kilborn. Count Proteus doesn't do impressions, he becomes other people. He can be man, woman, child. He can be tall or short, fat or thin, anything he wants. He's the best."

"If you say so, ma'am. But what do they have to do with you and me?"

For the first time, she looked as though she approved of what was going on. "You keep to the point, Kilborn. That's good. And here's the connection. I've signed Three For The Show and Count Proteus to do *Hamlet* live, on stage, before an audience." She gave me a cold smile. "You've heard of *Hamlet*, I take it?"

"It's a play, isn't it, ma'am?"

"It's *the* play, Kilborn. There hasn't been a live *Hamlet* in this city since I played Ophelia thirty-six years ago, and we're going to put on the performance that will stand as definitive for as long as there are two people to act and one to applaud. I'm talking theater history, Kilborn."

"Yes, ma'am. And what's my part in it?"

"I'm also talking about a two billion dollar property which will be worth ten billion before we're through. Maybe twenty. Maybe fifty. I want you to keep an eye on Proteus and Three until every frame is in the can."

"Then you'll be filming it for the hollies?"

"You bet I'll be filming it. And until I do, every cent is at risk."

"If all you want is a bodyguard, then maybe—" I<sup>3</sup> started to say, but broke off when I<sup>3</sup> saw me<sup>4</sup> walk in. At sight of the client, I<sup>4</sup> stopped in my<sup>4</sup> tracks and stood for a moment astonished; then I<sup>4</sup> whipped off my<sup>4</sup> hat, stepped before her chair, and made a low sweeping bow.

"Madame Siddons, you do this humble office a great honor," I<sup>4</sup> said in my<sup>4</sup> most solemn voice. The cool glance of those green eyes warmed just a bit as I<sup>4</sup> went on, "Should anything be causing you concern, Madame, I hope you will allow me to assist you, the most illustrious figure of the modern theater, with all the resources at my command."

I<sup>4</sup> was good at this kind of thing, and I<sup>3</sup> was glad to see me<sup>4</sup>. It goes back to what I<sup>3</sup> was saying about division of labor. This kind of client was my<sup>4</sup> meat, not mine<sup>3</sup>. I<sup>1,2,3</sup> wouldn't know how to deal with her at all.

"I spoke to Lieutenant Gutierrez this morning. She asked about the Gunderson papers," I<sup>4</sup> said to me<sup>3</sup>.

I<sup>3</sup> clapped a hand to my<sup>3</sup> brow and exclaimed, "I completely forgot about the Gunderson business! I've got to bring up that whole file and check every entry by . . . I'll never make it."

"If Madame has no objection to dealing with me, I'll be glad to fill in," I<sup>4</sup> said, turning to Siddons with an expectant smile.

She shot one frigid glance at me<sup>3</sup> and then looked up at me<sup>4</sup> warmly. "No objection at all, laddie," she said. "It's not a question of bodyguards. I know where I can get bodyguards. I want *you*, Kilborn."

I<sup>1</sup> studied her for a moment, then took a seat facing her. Placing my<sup>1</sup> fingertips together, I<sup>1</sup> gazed up into the corner of the ceiling. "Aside from the obvious facts that you have come on a matter relating to the theater, involving a clone, and with a large amount at risk, I can deduce nothing," I<sup>1</sup> said, "... except for your initial reluctance to deal with me and your haste in coming here once you had decided, despite concern over the health of your white cat."

Even I<sup>3</sup> was impressed with that, and regretted that I<sup>3</sup> had to leave the office before I<sup>3</sup> could see the expression on her face. Not that there was anything wrong. "Gunderson" was a convenient code I used among myself to make sure clients were best handled. Right now, it meant that I<sup>3</sup> had to make a show of rushing out, and be content to eavesdrop.

Once I<sup>3</sup> was gone, I<sup>1</sup> said, "Now, if you'd begin—"

"Just a minute, laddie," Siddons broke in. "Don't think you can get away with spying on me. Who put you up to it?"

"Spying, Madame?"

"That's what I said, damn it, *spying*! Who is it, Kilborn—my maid? The cook? Has somebody bought off my whole staff?"

"I require no spies," I<sup>1</sup> said with dignity. "I observe, and I deduce."

"That I have a white cat? And she's sick?" She laughed and made as if to rise.

"There are tufts of cat hair at the hem of your skirt, Madame. The skirt was brushed, but in haste. You were hurrying out even as your maid was brushing," I<sup>1</sup> said. She settled back into the chair. I<sup>1</sup> went on, "The presence of white hairs on a black skirt suggests that concern for the cat overcame your habitual attention to grooming. The quantity of hair attests to the animal's ill health."

She was silent for a time. She reached down to pick a few white hairs from her skirt; then she demanded, "What about the rest? How did you know those other things?"

"You have seen my methods. It should be obvious."

"Well, it's not, and I didn't come here to play detective. You just walked in—how do you know why I'm here?"

"First, since your life has been spent in the world of theater, and this agency's most celebrated cases have dealt with the theater, it is unlikely that you would wish to engage me on some other matter. Secondly, the Lucky Clover Detective Agency is owned and operated by a clone and is known for dealing successfully with clone-related cases. Thirdly, my fees are the highest in the city. I am not engaged for trivial matters."

"Now that you explain it, it makes sense. It's really very simple."

"It always is, Madame—once I've explained."

"Don't be touchy, Kilborn. I had to know if there was a

leak. This project is absolutely secret, and I want it to stay secret until I'm ready to open the publicity campaign."

She gave me<sup>4</sup> a recap of the information she had given me<sup>3</sup> before I<sup>1</sup> arrived. I<sup>1</sup> was impressed. The theater has always been one of my<sup>1</sup> chief interests, and this production of *Hamlet* was sure to be as significant a theatrical event as Serena Siddons was touting it to be.

"Naturally, I'm pleased that you thought of this agency," I<sup>1</sup> said, "but I still don't understand why ordinary bodyguards won't do. You could hire a platoon of good ones for what you'll have to pay me."

"I don't want ordinary bodyguards, Kilborn. If it was up to me, I wouldn't be here. But I've got backers who put a lot of money into this, and they want to see some protection. And if I have to hire protection, I want the best."

"Very sensible," I<sup>1</sup> said.

"Besides, you're a clone. You think like a clone."

There's going to be a lot of pressure on Three and Proteus over the next few months. This is their first live production, and the first *Hamlet* in this city since I was a girl. I don't want anybody making them jumpy. Clones trust clones."

I<sup>1</sup> let that ridiculous bit of folklore pass without comment. "Proteus isn't a clone," I<sup>1</sup> pointed out.

"He's more like a clone than any other solo I've ever met," Siddons said. "You're a four-clone, Kilborn. My boys are a three-clone. Count Proteus has been a thousand people at one time or another."

"But only one at a time. It's not the same."

"Maybe not the same as being a true clone, but it's a lot closer to clone experience than to typical solo experience. You'd get along with him, Kilborn. Others wouldn't. And it's important to me and to the whole project that Proteus and Three be kept as calm and relaxed and happy as possible until we open."

I<sup>1</sup> certainly could not argue her last point. Show people are a temperamental lot under the best of circumstances. In these times, with live performance fighting to make a comeback and The Great Mulroney scandal still fresh in the public's mind, being a clone and an actor was a stressful condition. I<sup>1</sup> could see where the Lucky Clover Detective Agency would be helpful. And this was probably the only chance I<sup>1</sup> would ever get to see a live *Hamlet*.

Two days later I assembled one by one at Serena Siddons's apartment to meet Three For The Show. She was taking no chances. At her insistence, I came disguised as a reporter, accountant, outercom repairman, and analyst, while Three showed up as a hairdresser, fencing instructor, and dietician.

When we had all arrived, Siddons swept in to make the introductions and offer drinks. In the interests of secrecy, her staff had been given the day off, so we fixed our own. I<sup>1</sup> stuck to mineral water, but I<sup>1,2,3</sup> homed in on the twenty-four-year-old scotch. Three had a double vodka martini, a bourbon sour, and something blue with fruit in it.

The martini Three broke the ice clone-style by asking me<sup>1</sup>, "Was your original a detective?"

"Until shortly after he got his legs blown off," I<sup>1</sup> said.  
"How dreadful!"

"His very words." I<sup>1</sup> took a good swallow of the scotch and savored it with half-closed eyes and an expressionless face.

Turning to me<sup>2</sup>, Three<sup>1</sup> asked, "Was it an accident?"

"Sort of. Somebody accidentally planted a bomb in his car and it went off."

I<sup>1,2</sup> am sometimes off-putting in social situations. I<sup>1</sup> could sense Three's uneasiness, so I<sup>1</sup> moved in and said, "Joe Kilborn survived and brought in the people who planted the bomb. After that, he retired from the force and became a private investigator and student of criminology. He wrote the standard work on the evolution of electronic jurisprudence."

Three<sup>3</sup> said, "He wrote detective stories, too, didn't he?"

"Yes, in the last years of his career," I<sup>1</sup> said.

"What was your original, a bartender or a decorator?"

I<sup>2</sup> asked, pointing to the gaudy drink in Three<sup>3</sup>'s hand.

"I'm cloned from Sir Herbert Three," Three<sup>3</sup> announced.

"The finest actor of his day," Three<sup>1</sup> added proudly.

"One of the finest of all time. It's a pity we have so few examples of his work. Some scenes from his *Henry V*, a single speech from *Cyrano de Bergerac*. . . ." I<sup>1</sup> fell silent, shaking my<sup>1</sup> head ruefully.

"When the last theater in London closed its doors, he swore he'd never act again," said Three<sup>1</sup>.

"But I've got a hollie of his *Cyrano*, if you'd care to see it. And his entire *Richard III*," Three<sup>3</sup> said.

I<sup>1</sup> was delighted. Sir Herbert Three's acting was legendary, but his reluctance to have his performances recorded in any way meant that there was little to go upon but the legend. I<sup>1,2</sup> refilled my<sup>1,2</sup> glass and rejoined Three and me<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, I<sup>3</sup> spoke to our hostess apart from the others.

"How's everyone getting on?" she asked.

"We'll be all right, ma'am. It just takes a while to loosen up."

"Why? You're all clones. Isn't that the important thing?"

"He's a three-clone and I'm a four-clone. Three-clones have a reputation for never agreeing. Always two against one. Four-clones learn to agree. There's no tie-breaking vote."

"Three gets along together very well. I've never seen any serious disagreement."

"Well, then, things should be just fine, ma'am," I<sup>3</sup> said.

By this time, I<sup>1</sup> had gotten Three on the subject of his *Hamlet*. He was bursting to talk about the project, sometimes all at once, and his enthusiasm was even making me<sup>1,2</sup> ease up on the wisecracks and pay attention.

"For the first time, *Hamlet*'s divided nature will be made physically manifest to the audience. I'll be playing *Hamlet*, *Laertes*, and *Fortinbras*," said Three<sup>3</sup>.

"And, of course, *Claudius*," Three<sup>1</sup> added.

"And others, too. And I'll be switching back and forth constantly," said Three<sup>2</sup>.

"So the facet of *Hamlet*'s personality in each of these

characters will at last be plainly visible," Three<sup>1</sup> concluded.

"That will be tricky, won't it?" I<sup>1</sup> asked. "As I recall, *Hamlet*, *Laertes*, *Claudius*, and *Fortinbras* all appear on stage in the very last scene, along with other major characters."

"That's right. A couple of other scenes presented problems, too, but we've worked them out. We'll have to make quick changes, but we're used to that. And we'll have other actors to help out in the tricky spots."

"We'll need them for *Horatio*, and *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, and all those courtiers and ambassadors and soldiers," said Three<sup>1</sup>. "Serena's found some first-rate actors. Solos, of course, but they're very good."

"Proteus is a solo," said our hostess, who had joined us. "Have you forgotten?"

"Ah, but *Proteus* is one of a kind," said Three<sup>2</sup>.

"My point exactly. So glad you agree," said Siddons icily.

"He solves a lot of problems," Three<sup>2</sup> went on. "He'll be *Ophelia*—"

"*Ophelia*?" I<sup>1</sup> blurted, astonished.

"*Proteus* is very versatile," Three<sup>3</sup> assured me. "He'll take one of the major roles when all four have to be on the stage at once."

"And he'll play important minor characters, too, like *Osric*. And he'll be *Fortinbras*, in the last scene," said Three<sup>2</sup>.

The sheer complexity of it impressed me<sup>1,2</sup>, even though I<sup>2</sup> am not fond of theater and I<sup>1</sup> haven't read a book for years. "How do you plan to do this without falling all over yourselves?" I<sup>2</sup> asked.

"I'm directing, laddie. And when I direct, people don't fall all over themselves," said our hostess.

"I thought you were the producer," I<sup>1</sup> said.

"I am. I'm playing *Gertrude*, too. I think I can bring something to the part."

I<sup>3</sup> nodded, and so did I<sup>2</sup>, even though Siddons's words meant nothing to me<sup>2</sup>. I<sup>1</sup> looked at the others and grinned. "At least there's one role this guy *Proteus* won't get to play," I<sup>1</sup> said.

"Where is *Proteus*? Is he coming?" I<sup>1</sup> asked.

"He can't make it, Kilborn. We're going to meet him at his place," she said. "In fact, you just left."

*Proteus* had a townhouse at the end of a cul-de-sac overlooking the river. It was evening when my<sup>3</sup> roller pulled up at the door. A light rain had begun to fall. I<sup>3</sup> paid the driver and took a look at the building.

It was a classic of its kind, clean white limestone with every detail carefully preserved—or restored by experts. But I<sup>3</sup> wasn't interested in the architecture. I<sup>3</sup> was going to be watching out for Count *Proteus* for the next few months, and I<sup>3</sup> wanted to know whether his house was going to make the job harder or easier.

The house had the standard urban security systems, but it was no fortress. That was reassuring. Watching over someone who thinks he's invulnerable and immortal is hard, but being around someone who jumps out of his skin at every sound and sudden movement is worse.

This place suggested an occupant who was more interested in protecting his privacy than his skin. I<sup>3</sup> liked that.

Count Proteus was expecting me<sup>3</sup>. The outer gate clicked open as soon as I<sup>3</sup> gave my<sup>3</sup> name and code, and I<sup>3</sup> waited only a few seconds before the massive front door swung wide and a tall, deadpan butler greeted me<sup>3</sup> with a mournful, "Good evening, Mr. Kilborn. The master will be with you shortly. Please come this way."

I<sup>3</sup> followed him down a darkened hall lined with photographs and into a dimly lit library. A fire was burning in the fireplace. It was a real fire, with real logs. My<sup>3</sup> estimate of Proteus went up. Only the very rich could afford to burn wood these days, and only the very classy would have a fire burning in an empty room for the comfort of a private eye.

The butler took my<sup>3</sup> coat and hat and assured me<sup>3</sup> that the master would join me<sup>3</sup> in a few minutes. That was just fine. It gave me<sup>3</sup> time to look around.

I<sup>3</sup> was studying the bookshelf near the window when a round little woman dressed all in black, with graying hair pulled back in a knot, entered the room and in a soft, motherly voice asked, "Would you like a cup of tea while you're waiting, Mr. Kilborn? It will warm you up after that nasty drizzle."

"No, thank you, ma'am," I<sup>3</sup> said. "But I'd appreciate it if you'd answer a few questions."

"Oh, dear me, there isn't any trouble, is there?" she asked, wringing her hands and glancing anxiously around the room.

"No trouble at all, ma'am. I'm going to be working very closely with Count Proteus for the next few months, and I'd like to learn all I can about him and the household. You can be a great help."

She shrank back. "You're not a reporter, are you?"

"No, ma'am. I'm a private detective."

"Oh, I see. Middleton didn't say you were a detective, Mr. Kilborn, so I assumed . . . oh, dear, I am sorry," she said, resuming her hand-wringing.

"No need to apologize, ma'am. Is Middleton the butler?"

"That's right, Mr. Kilborn. He's been with the master for nearly six years now. I'm Mrs. Etherege. Georgina Etherege. The housekeeper."

"And Mr. Etherege?"

"He died in 2034," she said, lowering her gaze.

"I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am. Is there anyone else in the household besides you and Middleton and Count Proteus?"

"Well, there's Otway, the cook. And the girl who helps out in the kitchen, poor thing."

"Why do you call her 'poor thing,' ma'am?"

"Ida's not in full possession of her senses, Mr. Kilborn. She has delusions. She thinks she's the Gish sisters."

"That's too bad, ma'am," I<sup>3</sup> said, assuming from her solemn tone that it in fact was. I<sup>3</sup> would have known who the Gish sisters were, but I<sup>3</sup> didn't have a clue. Maybe I<sup>3</sup> should cover Proteus instead of me<sup>3</sup>, I<sup>3</sup>

thought. But then, without me<sup>4</sup> around, I<sup>1,2</sup> would probably make Three uneasy. This was something to talk over back at the office.

"Oh, it's not so bad. After all, there were only the two, Lillian and Dorothy. Sometimes Ida's one, sometimes the other. It doesn't affect her work at all," said Mrs. Etherege.

"She's never both at the same time, then?"

"Oh, dear, no. And most of the time she's just our poor Ida."

I<sup>3</sup> nodded and tried to look sympathetic. It was necessary to remember that solos had problems, too, and most of the time a solo had no one around to listen and understand. If solos started talking to themselves, people thought they were crazy.

"Would you like to speak with them?" Mrs. Etherege asked. "I mean with Otway or Ida," she added quickly.

"Maybe before I go, ma'am. I want to be ready to talk with Count Proteus as soon as he can see me."

"Of course you do, Oh, and there's one other person. I expect you'll be meeting her this evening."

"Who's that, ma'am?"

"Millwood, the master's business manager. She attends to all his professional affairs. She's not available right now, but you should be able to see her before you leave," said Mrs. Etherege, backing toward the door.

"Are you sure you don't want tea?"

"I'm sure, ma'am."

She slipped noiselessly out of the room, leaving me<sup>3</sup> alone once again. It was too dark now to read the titles, so I<sup>3</sup> pulled a chair up before the fireplace and stretched my<sup>3</sup> feet out to the warmth. A real wood fire was a rare treat. It seemed only sensible to enjoy it while I<sup>3</sup> could.

A few minutes passed, and then I<sup>3</sup> was aware of someone in the room. In the shadows by the door stood a figure all in black. Count Proteus had entered the library as silently as his housekeeper had left.

I<sup>3</sup> started up, but he gestured for me<sup>3</sup> to stay seated. In a hushed, cultured monotone, he said, "Please don't rise, Mr. Kilborn. I like my guests to be comfortable."

"You surprised me, Count."

"It is my profession to surprise . . . to astound . . . to astonish. Tell me, Mr. Kilborn, what do you think of my household?"

"I've only met the butler and the housekeeper. They looked all right to me."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Kilborn." The Count didn't move from the shadows by the door. Even if he had, the rest of the room was so gloomy by now that it would have made no difference. He showed no interest in turning up the lights.

I<sup>3</sup> remembered then some of the things I<sup>3</sup>'d read about Count Proteus. He was a very private person. In fact, he was almost pathological about his privacy. When he was not working, he was invisible. He avoided photographers, granted no interviews, permitted no one near him. I<sup>3</sup> was probably the first outsider to enter his house, and I<sup>3</sup> certainly wasn't getting a good look. It was hard to say whether this was all real, and I<sup>3</sup> really didn't care whether it was or not. What I<sup>3</sup> wondered

was whether it was going to make my<sup>3</sup> work easier or harder.

Proteus laughed softly and said, "So you found nothing unusual about Mrs. Etherge and Middleton."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, I'll have to tell that to the master, Mr. Kilborn. And are you sure you don't want a nice cup of tea?" It was Mrs. Etherge's voice, no question about it, and Proteus seemed to have gotten smaller and rounder as he stood there wringing his hands. Then, abruptly, he seemed to grow and swell, and I<sup>3</sup> heard Middleton's plummy voice say, "It is most gratifying, sir, to know that you do not find us suspicious characters."

"That's pretty impressive, Count," I<sup>3</sup> said, trying not to show how impressive it really was. It was so impressive that it made me<sup>3</sup> suspicious of everything I<sup>3</sup>'d seen.

"It is my profession," Proteus said in his normal voice—in the voice he'd first used, anyway—"And I am good at it. Are you as good at yours?"

"I've done pretty well so far. You've heard of the Great Mulroney case, I suppose."

"I have indeed. A tragic affair."

"It could have been worse. I prevented a murder."

"I was referring to the tragic waste of talent, Mr. Kilborn. The Great Mulroney was a gifted clone, but he squandered his gifts on pratfalls and pie-throwing. I am saddened by the thought of what he might have achieved."

"He almost achieved the murder of his manager."

Again Proteus laughed that soft private laugh. "We speak at cross-purposes, Mr. Kilborn. But no matter. Seren has explained the reason for your presence. I feel no need for protection, but I have no wish to be difficult. You are welcome so long as you do not interfere with my work or make any attempt to violate my privacy. Is that understood?"

"Understood."

"Millwood will acquaint you with my schedule and the household routine, and provide any necessary information. Good evening, Mr. Kilborn."

He turned to leave. I<sup>3</sup> said, "Just a minute, Count. I have a question."

"I have no time for it, Mr. Kilborn. Question my staff, if you like."

"It's about your staff. Is there really a Middleton and a Mrs. Etherge, or are you playing games with me? Is there really a Millwood?"

He stopped at the door, deep in the shadows, and said, "Millwood is real. As for the others . . . you claim to be a good detective. Find out for yourself."

He was gone before I<sup>3</sup> could respond. I<sup>3</sup> stood by the chair, trying to get things straight. It wasn't easy. Proteus's impersonation of Middleton and Etherge had been so flawless that I<sup>3</sup> couldn't be sure that the butler and housekeeper hadn't been Proteus in disguise. But why would he do that? To test me<sup>3</sup>? If so, I<sup>3</sup> had flunked. It might be some private joke, his own way of staying in practice, or keeping the world at arm's length. Whatever his reasons, Count Proteus was going to be a tough client. I<sup>3</sup> had the brains to handle him, but I<sup>3</sup> felt

that he could make me<sup>3</sup> look foolish with very little effort. I<sup>3</sup> decided that the smart thing to do was to wash my<sup>3</sup> hands of Proteus after tonight, and turn him over to me<sup>4</sup>. Proteus would never know the difference. Solos never do.

Then she entered the room, and any thought of changing assignments vanished at the sight of her. She was tall and slender, with a beautiful figure and the carriage of a queen. Her perfume was delicate; it made me<sup>3</sup> think of spring and flowers and soft rain. Her honey-blond hair was worn long and loose; her eyes were pale blue, her features perfect in an oval face. I<sup>3</sup> looked at her in the glow of the fire, and knew that I<sup>3</sup> would do anything this woman asked. I<sup>3</sup> had fallen in love with her on the spot, and though I<sup>3</sup> had no previous experience in permanent undying love, I<sup>3</sup> knew that this was it. Fortunately, I<sup>3</sup>'ve learned to keep my<sup>3</sup> feelings from showing, so when I<sup>3</sup> introduced my<sup>3</sup>self, my<sup>3</sup> voice was steady.

Her voice was a match for her appearance. It was soft and husky, a voice perfectly suited to firelight and a cozy room. "Morgana Millwood, Mr. Kilborn. I'm pleased to meet you," she said, holding out her hand. "Let's sit by the fire. Is this light sufficient?"

"It's perfect, ma'am," I<sup>3</sup> said. She wore a dark blue dress of soft clinging material. The firelight struck highlights from it, and I<sup>3</sup> had the crazy image of a goddess come down to earth wrapped in the night sky, stars and all. I<sup>3</sup> had never thought like that before in my<sup>3</sup> life, but the sight of Morgana Millwood was turning me<sup>3</sup> into a poet.

"Call me Morgana, please. And may I call you Joe?"

"I'd be happy if you did."

Neither of us had moved. We stood looking into one another's eyes without speaking, then we both spoke at once, in a rush, and then we laughed, embarrassed. She laid her hand on mine<sup>3</sup> and said, "Joe, I'm sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

I<sup>3</sup> don't know how to be subtle. I<sup>3</sup> took her hand in both of mine<sup>3</sup> and said, "If it's the same thing that came over me, don't be sorry."

"Joe, do you feel . . . ?"

"I do, Morgana. I never did before, but I do now."

Then she was in my<sup>3</sup> arms. I<sup>3</sup> can't describe how I<sup>3</sup> felt. If you've been there you know, and if you haven't you don't, and no words will help you. After a time she took my<sup>3</sup> face in her hands and looked up at me<sup>3</sup>, and then she laughed, a little shy laugh, so happy and innocent it made me<sup>3</sup> fall for her all over again.

"Joe, what's happening to us? We're not a couple of kids. We're supposed to be talking about business," she said.

"Let's talk business later."

"Business now, Joe. Then we'll have time for other things."

We sat before the fire, drawing the chairs close, and she filled me<sup>3</sup> in on the household routine and Proteus's daily schedule. It was hard to keep my<sup>3</sup> mind on business, but long habit carried me<sup>3</sup> through when inclination made me<sup>3</sup> want to consign to hell Count Proteus

and Three for the Show and Serena Siddons and everybody else but Morgana Millwood.

Proteus ran his life like an elaborate timepiece. Everything was scheduled, and the schedule was sacred. He spent most of the day in his fourth-floor retreat, a combination of theater, gymnasium, studio, and rehearsal hall that was permanently off limits to the rest of the human race. Even Morgana had never set foot in it. He breakfasted every morning at nine-fifteen, then vanished upstairs. Mrs. Etherege brought his lunch up at one-fifteen and placed it on a table outside the door. She picked up the tray, sometimes untouched, at two o'clock sharp. Proteus left his sanctum at four-thirty, when he withdrew to rest before going to theater or studio, or wherever he was playing. He was always home in time for a light supper at midnight, after which he vanished once again, presumably to sleep. This was his routine, day after day. Everything revolved around this schedule and a few inflexible rules: no visitors, no prying, no contact with the media.

I<sup>3</sup> had thought that working for such a clock-bound fanatic had to rank low on anyone's list of favorite occupations, but Morgana insisted otherwise, and claimed that Middleton, Mrs. Etherege, and the rest of the staff agreed with her. If you could mind your own business and be punctual in the things that mattered to him, Proteus asked little else and paid generously for your service. And, she added, there was a kind of excitement in being so close to such a great and mysterious man.

"So Middleton and Mrs. Etherege are real," I<sup>3</sup> said. "For a time, I wondered. Proteus is so good I couldn't tell him from the real thing. But why did he do it? He doesn't have to impress me."

She shrugged. "Maybe he just felt playful."

"Maybe. He couldn't fool me if he tried to impersonate you, though. Has he ever tried?"

"I wouldn't know. That's another of his rules: none of us is ever to see him perform. He doesn't even allow us near the theater."

"You mean you've never seen him act?"

"None of us on the staff have. He's adamant on that point."

"What about tapes? There must be tapes, and hollies."

"Very few, and he'd destroy those if he could. He doesn't allow his work to be recorded. He believes that performance should be seen live or not at all."

"You work for a very strange guy, Morgana."

"Not so strange, Joe. He came up the hard way. Now that live theater is coming back, Count Proteus is in demand everywhere, and he can name his own terms."

"What about this *Hamlet* deal? There'll be tapes and hollies of that. Does he know?"

"Of course. He's willing to compromise, just this once, for the chance to act in *Hamlet*. It will be the great achievement of his career. But there won't be any recording of any kind until he's satisfied with the performance. That's in the contract."

"I still think he's strange."

She looked at me<sup>3</sup> earnestly and leaned forward to

take my<sup>3</sup> hands in a firm grip. Her perfume caressed me<sup>3</sup> like a gentle spring breeze. "Think of what his life has been like, Joe. He's impersonated all the giants of the stage in their great roles. He's been Barrymore and Olivier and Gielgud as Hamlet, Walter Hampden and José Ferrer as Cyrano, Jason Robards as Hickey, Laurette Taylor as Amanda Wingfield—he's always been playing the part of someone playing the part of someone else, always wearing one more mask than everyone else on stage. His idea of reality is bound to be different from yours and mine. Try to understand, Joe. He needs your understanding."

None of those names meant much to me<sup>3</sup>, but it was plain that they meant a lot to her, and I<sup>3</sup> got the general idea. Proteus had made it to the top, but like all successful people he had changed along the way, and the changes hurt. A clone can have a thousand faces, but they'll all be the same. It provides a certain security. For a solo, every face is different. No wonder there are so many crazy solos.

"I'll try to understand him, sweetheart. For your sake. You think a lot of Count Proteus, don't you?"

"He's done a lot for me, Joe. I'll always be grateful to him."

"Is that as far as it goes?"

"I never loved Proteus as a woman loves a man, if that's what you mean. Until today, I've never loved anyone. I still can't believe what's happened. The minute I saw you . . ." She looked at me<sup>3</sup>, wide-eyed, and shook her head helplessly.

"Believe it. It happened to me, too," I<sup>3</sup> said.

Morgana and I<sup>3</sup> decided to keep things quiet, at least for a while. It's unprofessional for someone in my<sup>3</sup> business to fall for a client, and she didn't want to do anything that might upset Proteus.

As things turned out, it was not difficult to keep our relationship secret. The next few weeks were busy, and I<sup>3</sup> got together with me<sup>1,2,4</sup> only two or three times a week for a quick exchange of information. Morgana was free when Proteus was in his fourth-floor hideaway, but we couldn't leave the house. Once he started rehearsing with Three, I<sup>3</sup> had to stick with him and she couldn't come along, thanks to his crazy rules. Rehearsals went on well into the night, and sometimes into the morning, and when Proteus and I<sup>3</sup> returned to the townhouse, I<sup>3</sup> still wouldn't see Morgana for an hour or more. It was part of Proteus's routine to dictate all his observations on the rehearsal to her, so she could organize them for study and have them printed out by breakfast time. The crazy hours were knocking Morgana out, but she didn't complain. She knew that Proteus was a perfectionist. She had her job, and she did it.

Seeing Proteus on stage gave me<sup>3</sup> a different view of him. Sure, he was strange, but he knew his business. When he came on as Ophelia—she's maybe sixteen years old, innocent and sweet—Proteus was little and frail. He was your kid sister, the girl next door, the beautiful princess from all the fairy tales you've ever heard. And not long after that, he was a bald, squat,

pot-bellied old gravedigger with a boozier's rasp in his voice and a wheezing cough. At the end of the play he was Fortinbras, a tough professional soldier, and he looked about six-foot-six with shoulders that wouldn't go through a doorway head-on.

He played other parts, too. They all did, and after a while I<sup>3</sup> lost track and stopped trying to tell one from the other. But Proteus was the marvel on that stage. Nobody could stretch and shrink and bloat up and trim down like that night after night, I<sup>3</sup> kept telling myself. But Proteus did it, and seemed to do it just a little bit better every time. It made me<sup>3</sup> feel spooky when we rode home in his private roller after rehearsals. I<sup>3</sup> was always afraid I'd start changing right before my<sup>3</sup> eyes.

Not that I<sup>3</sup> could have seen it even if he had. Proteus could have turned into an octopus and I<sup>3</sup> wouldn't have known, the way he kept the roller darkened, and had his hat pulled down and his collar up. It bothered him to have anyone in the roller at all, even though I<sup>3</sup> was seated up front and could only catch a glimpse of him by twisting around until my<sup>3</sup> neck ached. Every time I<sup>3</sup> did, he'd shrink into himself a little more. Proteus loved secrecy as much as he loved perfection.

Just how much he loved his secrecy had become clear right away, when I<sup>4</sup> ran the routine check on everyone involved in this project. Serena Siddons's print-out could have papered every wall in the office, with enough left over for the hall. Three's was almost as extensive. The printout for Count Proteus ran to two sheets. Most of it was white space.

I<sup>4</sup> was furious. "Look at this! Date of birth: blank. Place of birth: blank. I can't even get a continent!"

"I told you he likes his privacy," I<sup>3</sup> reminded me<sup>4</sup>, and I<sup>4</sup> got a laugh out of my<sup>4</sup> reaction.

I<sup>4</sup> was not amused. This was a challenge to my<sup>4</sup> skill, and I<sup>4</sup> was ready now to sit at the terminal until doomsday in order to access Proteus's background.

"What's the problem?" I<sup>2</sup> asked. "That kind of privacy costs. If Proteus spent the money, let him enjoy it."

"He's just building up his image as a mystery man. It's strictly business," I<sup>3</sup> added.

I<sup>4</sup> was adamant. "Nobody is that secretive unless he has something to hide."

I<sup>4</sup> exchanged a patient smile and I<sup>3</sup> said, "So maybe he's Wally Zunkfuddle from North Pinhole, Montana. People change their names when they go on stage, don't they?"

"Especially if the name is Wally Zunkfuddle," I<sup>4</sup> said.

I<sup>4</sup> still wasn't happy, but there was no point arguing, and no reason to do a deep background search. After that, there was never enough time for one, or for anything else.

Rehearsals went along smoothly, and soon opening night was a week away. It couldn't come soon enough for me<sup>3</sup>. Even though there hadn't been a hint of trouble, these clients were taking up a lot of time. I<sup>1,2,4</sup> was down to four hours sleep a night. Between Proteus and Morgana, I<sup>3</sup> wasn't even getting that.

Morgana was having it tough, too. Proteus turned up the pressure as opening night drew near, and she was

run off her feet. That last week we spent our time together—never more than ten minutes at a stretch—sitting in his library, hand in hand, her head on my<sup>3</sup> shoulder, both of us too tired to do anything but talk. In very short sentences.

I<sup>3</sup> still hadn't told me<sup>1,2,4</sup> about Morgana. I<sup>3</sup> had the feeling that I<sup>4</sup> suspected that I<sup>3</sup> had something on my<sup>3</sup> mind, but I<sup>2</sup> didn't seem to notice a thing. And even I<sup>3</sup> probably didn't suspect that a woman was involved. I<sup>3</sup> wondered what I<sup>1,2,4</sup> said when I<sup>3</sup> announced that I<sup>3</sup> meant to get married. Clones and solos marrying isn't all that unusual, but it had never come up before among me.

The night before *Hamlet* was to open, I<sup>3</sup> asked Morgana to marry me<sup>3</sup>, and she accepted. We were both half knocked out with exhaustion, but I<sup>3</sup> never forget taking her in my<sup>3</sup> arms, just holding her close, breathing in the soft fragrance of her perfume, being happier than I<sup>3</sup> had ever been before. She let a lot of painful things come out then, in that rush of happiness, things she'd never told anyone else. I<sup>3</sup> had always figured that life was easy for a smart, beautiful woman. Morgana taught me<sup>3</sup> otherwise.

She'd been a founding, an abandoned kid brought up in a series of homes, some good, some bad. The last one was the worst, so bad she ran away and was on her own at fifteen. She was a beauty even then, and that had caused her more problems than it solved. Her looks got her into show business, and after a few tough years she landed a job assisting a small-time impressionist who was just starting his career, doing the scroungy club circuit that was all the work he could get in those days. But in time, both he and the opportunities for live entertainers improved considerably, and he took to calling himself Count Proteus. She'd stayed with him as he went to the top.

"He'll miss you if you leave him after all these years," I<sup>3</sup> said.

"I don't think he will, Joe. He might even retire after this *Hamlet*. He can afford it now."

"I can't picture a guy like him retiring."

"He will. And when he does, he may just disappear completely."

"If anybody can do it, Proteus can. But why would he?"

"He's tired, Joe. He's worn out."

"He's not the only one."

We both yawned, and that set us laughing, very softly and wearily, hardly making a sound. She said, "Only one more night, Joe."

"You'll still be knocking yourself out for Proteus."

"Once the show's opened, we'll have a lot more time together. I have a feeling that Proteus will agree to the hollies early on. It won't be a long run, and once it closes, we'll be free to marry whenever we like."

"I'll get the license tomorrow—just in case the show is a flop," I<sup>3</sup> said.

But when tomorrow came, I<sup>3</sup> didn't even have time to get my<sup>3</sup> breakfast. Serena Siddons called Proteus's house

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a dozen times that day, checking on his health. I<sup>3</sup> saw Morgana exactly twice, for a total of about forty seconds. The rest of the time she was working with Proteus. The whole house was charged up. Middleton ran up and down stairs like a teen-ager, Mrs. Etherage scurried from room to room wringing her hands, and Ida scrubbed everything in the kitchen twice: once as Dorothy, once as Lillian. And the theater was even worse.

When the play finally started, I<sup>3</sup> was ready to drop. I<sup>3</sup> took the seat reserved for me<sup>3</sup> in the third row, while I<sup>2</sup> stayed in the wings and I<sup>1</sup> took a seat in the stage manager's booth. I<sup>3</sup> expected to doze off, job or no job, as soon as the lights went down. But no one slept through that performance. It was magnificent.

Three was as good as everyone expected him to be, but I<sup>3</sup> had a special interest in Proteus. Whenever he was on stage, I<sup>3</sup> fixed on him, and he was onstage almost constantly. This night he did something he'd never done in rehearsal. He played Ophelia as Morgana. It was unmistakable. He had her voice and every gesture down pat. It was strange to sit there seeing and hearing painful things happen to the woman I<sup>3</sup> loved and all the time knowing that she was safe across town, waiting for me<sup>3</sup>. When the account of Ophelia's drowning was given, I<sup>3</sup> choked up, and an awful feeling of doom came over me<sup>3</sup> at the thought of ever losing Morgana.

I<sup>3</sup> didn't like Proteus for doing that, but I<sup>3</sup> couldn't deny his brilliance as an actor. Minutes after doing Ophelia's mad scene he was a gravel-voiced gravedigger, with bulging red nose and swaying belly. And in the last scene of the play, with all the main characters dead by trickery and treachery, he strode on as Fortinbras. That's a small part, but he stretched it to something big. Here's a guy who's fought and never won the prize, been held back and kept down and made to wait, and now it all drops into his lap. The way Proteus played him, Fortinbras was a giant—proud, confident, self-assured, a man whose faith in himself had never wavered and now was justified before the world.

When the lights went down, there was a moment of absolute silence, and then an outburst of applause that went on and on. It got louder, and still the lights did not come on. I<sup>3</sup> slipped from my<sup>3</sup> seat and went backstage to see what was wrong. This was not part of the play.

The first person I<sup>3</sup> saw was Serena, leaning on my<sup>4</sup> arm. Under the heavy makeup she looked weary and shrunken. I<sup>3</sup> had the same feeling of doom I<sup>3</sup> had felt at Ophelia's death.

She grabbed at my<sup>3</sup> sleeve. "He's dead. All of him. Murdered," she said in a shaky voice.

"Who?"

"Three. All three."

"What happened?" I<sup>3</sup> asked me<sup>4</sup>.

"The sword. It was razor-sharp, and something was smeared on the tip," I<sup>4</sup> said.

"So whoever did it stuck to the script."

"No. The wine wasn't poisoned, or Serena would be dead, too. Someone wanted to kill Three and no one else. He was playing Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius, and

they're the only ones touched by the sword," I<sup>4</sup> explained.

"What will we do?" Serena moaned.

"Leave that to me. But first I want you to give the best performance of your life . . . if you can," I<sup>4</sup> said.

Serena covered her face with her hands for a moment, then looked up and nodded. "I can."

I<sup>4</sup> laid my<sup>4</sup> hands on her shoulders. "Go out there and tell them that there won't be any certain calls tonight. Give any reason you like, Serena, or none at all, but get them out of the theater quietly, without panic."

"But how? What can I say?" she asked, wavering.

"Improvise. You can do it," I<sup>4</sup> said.

She took a deep breath, then straightened and looked me<sup>3/4</sup> in the eye. "I'll do it," she said. She turned, and walked out cool and poised as a queen.

As soon as she was gone, I<sup>4</sup> said, "I've called Homicide, and I'm staying with the bodies and the murder weapon. I've given word that no one backstage is to leave."

"Is it wise to let the audience go?"

"There's no way of keeping them here. Anyway, this wasn't done by anyone in the audience. No one came backstage once the play started."

"The sword could have been poisoned before," I<sup>4</sup> pointed out.

"No. I checked them all at intermission, and they were clean."

"But they were blunted, weren't they?"

"There was a transparent sheath covering the last fifteen inches of the blade. Someone stripped it off just before the fencing match," I<sup>4</sup> said.

"Any ideas?"

I<sup>4</sup> shrugged. "It could have been anyone. Anyone but Three."

That feeling of doom came over me<sup>3</sup> again. I<sup>3</sup> grabbed my<sup>4</sup> arm and said, "How can I be sure that all three Three are Three? One of them could be Count Proteus."

"Three played Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius in that scene, and they're the ones who died. Proteus played Fortinbras."

"What if they decided to switch roles at the last minute? They changed roles a few times during the play. They could have done it in the last scene, too."

"But why would they?"

"Who knows why actors do anything?"

"It's a possibility," I<sup>4</sup> conceded. "And it's easy to check. All I have to do is find Fortinbras and—"

A guard came running up, stopped in front of me<sup>3/4</sup>, and panted, "Mr. Kilborn, sir, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I let him go."

"Who?"

"Mr. Three, sir. He was in a hurry, and I didn't know anything had happened. He just rushed right by."

"Are you sure it was Three?" I<sup>4</sup> asked.

"Yes, sir. No doubt about it."

So I<sup>3</sup> was right. For some reason, Proteus had switched roles with one of Three for that scene, and now he was dead. But why had he done it on opening

night? Why did he do it at all? Was his death the outcome of a careful plot that had been a long time in hatching, or a case of mistaken identity? No matter how things appeared, no one could be sure of anything until all the people who might be involved were physically present and clearly visible. So far, the chief suspects were actors and stagehands—people who spent their lives making audiences believe that fantasy was reality.

"It could still have been Proteus, you know," I<sup>3</sup> said. "He could have fooled the guard into thinking he was Three."

"We won't know for sure until we get the makeup off the bodies," I<sup>3</sup> said.

While I<sup>3,4</sup> was pondering the guard's news, a second guard rushed up. He was carrying a bundle, which he thrust into my<sup>4</sup> arms.

"I found this behind the steps, Mr. Kilborn. It's a costume," he said.

"Fortinbras's costume," I<sup>4</sup> said.

"This may be the proof that they did switch roles.

Let's see it."

I<sup>4</sup> tossed me<sup>3</sup> the costume. It looked heavy, but it wasn't. Most of it was the lightweight padding that built the person wearing it up to heroic size. As I<sup>3</sup> examined it more closely, I<sup>3</sup> caught a faint whiff of a familiar fragrance. I<sup>3</sup> dropped the costume as if it were on fire, and took an unsteady step backwards. As I<sup>3</sup> did so, a great roar of applause and cheering swept over me<sup>3,4</sup> from the front of the house, drowning the cries and questions. When it subsided, I<sup>3</sup> was aware of my<sup>4</sup> hand on my<sup>3</sup> shoulder, and Serena looking at me<sup>3</sup> as if I<sup>3</sup> were a ghost.

"What's wrong?" I<sup>4</sup> asked.

"I have to go. Give me an hour, then meet me at Proteus's house," I<sup>3</sup> said.

I<sup>3</sup> let my<sup>3</sup>self in at the servants' entrance and went directly to the fourth floor. Morgana was there, at a desk, sorting through papers. A small suitcase was on the floor beside the desk. She gave a start when she saw me<sup>3</sup>.

"Joe! I didn't expect you so early."

"I left before it was over. I've had enough *Hamlet* to last a long time."

"Then . . . you didn't see the end?"

I<sup>3</sup> laughed. "I know how it ends, don't I? But what are you doing here? I thought this place was off limits."

"Proteus told me to come here, Joe. He said there was a surprise for me—for us."

"Us?"

"I told him everything, Joe. He was happy. I've never seen him so happy."

"I've never seen him happy at all. He seemed pretty keyed-up to me, especially these past few days."

"Did you notice it, too?"

"Couldn't help it. He was as jumpy as a man getting ready to commit a murder."

She winced. "Don't say things like that, Joe."

"Sorry. What's this surprise he had?"

"Oh, Joe, it's incredible! Count Proteus is the kindest, most generous man I ever knew. Look at this."

She held out a letter. I<sup>3</sup> read it over quickly and gave a single low whistle. The letter gave Morgana Millwood a half interest in Proteus's share of *Hamlet*.

"We can be together for the rest of our lives, Joe, just the two of us, anywhere we want to be. We can go away tonight, right now, and never tell a soul," she said, coming into my<sup>3</sup> arms, putting her soft mouth to mine<sup>3</sup>, nestling close. I<sup>3</sup> breathed in the sweetness of her perfume, and wanted to keep this moment forever. But I<sup>3</sup> knew it couldn't last.

"Joe, let's go now. Right now," she whispered.

I<sup>3</sup> took her hand and led her to a chair. "Sit down, Morgana. I want to tell you something."

"Later, Joe. Let's go now, right away."

"I lied to you. I stayed to the end of *Hamlet*."

"Oh? What's so important about that, Joe? I thought you had a big confession to make."

"I made mine. Now it's your turn. Sit down." She sat and looked up at me<sup>3</sup>, frowning slightly, looking genuinely puzzled. "I want you to tell me the truth about that small-time impressionist. It's the one thing I can't figure out."

"Joe, what do you mean? What are you trying to say?"

"Did he die, or did you kill him, too?"

She whispered my<sup>3</sup> name once, very softly, then she turned away and stared blankly into the darkness of the far corner of the room. I<sup>3</sup> pulled up a chair and sat facing her.

"Let me see if I have it right. You were a kid with the face of an angel and a body that every man you met was hungry for—every one but this guy. He was different. Sure, he saw that you were beautiful, but he saw something else that the others didn't. He spotted that one-in-a-million gift, and he helped you to bring it out."

"I didn't kill him, Joe. Not in the way you mean. I'll always be grateful to him."

"What happened?"

"He made me his assistant, and started teaching me everything he knew. He had all the theory, but not much talent. I was a natural—like a chameleon. In three months, I was the act and he was the assistant. People didn't even bother to talk to him any more, except to ask for me. He tried to keep up a front, but one night in San Francisco he took a walk across the bridge and never got to the other side."

"And that's when Count Proteus was born."

"No. That came later. I knew I had the talent, but I still had a lot to learn if I was going to be the best, and I meant to be the best. I had some money by then, so I found the best teachers and worked hard with them. I traveled around Europe and the East, and when I was ready, I came back here as Count Proteus. When people asked questions, I just smiled and referred them to my assistant, Millwood, who told them nothing. The more mysterious I was, the better they liked it."

"Why Count Proteus? Why not Countess?"

She smiled and shrugged. "Just one more mask, Joe. I felt safer behind it."

"When did you find out where all that talent came from? You must have wondered."

"Genius, Joe. Not talent, sheer genius," she said. "Yes, I wondered. I nearly went crazy wondering. I spent a fortune trying to find out who my real parents were, and I learned nothing." She took my<sup>3</sup> hand in hers. "The other private investigators aren't in your league."

"I try harder. So when did you find out?"

"Not until I signed with Serena and met Three for the first time. It hit me like a bolt of lightning, Joe. You know how it is. We can sense these things."

"Three didn't sense it."

"I was Count Proteus at the time. Safe behind my impenetrable mask." Her expression hardened and she drew her hands back. "Besides, Three couldn't even begin to imagine the truth. He had my original's full freight of misogyny."

"Sir Herbert Three was no woman-hater, Morgana. He was married four times and had dozens of mistresses. He couldn't keep away from women."

Morgana looked at me<sup>3</sup> clinically for a time; then she shook her head and laughed a faint, humorless laugh. "I know the stories better than you do, Joe. Sir Herbert Three believed in loving and leaving, breaking hearts, treating women like disposable cups you use once and then crumple and throw away. He had his wives and he had his affairs, but no woman was good enough to bear his child. He left orders to be cloned. He wanted four male heirs, four perfect little images of himself uncontaminated by a woman's touch." She sat back. She smiled, then she laughed, and it was a laugh of sheer delight. "But something went wrong. A chromosome decided it wasn't going to go along with the process of making four little Sir Herberts. And then there were three. And me—the dirty little secret that had to be hidden away."

"You didn't have to kill him, Morgana," I<sup>3</sup> said.

"I didn't want to, Joe, I swear I didn't. I kept waiting for one of him to show a single glimmer of recognition. We were closer than sister and brother, closer than twins—but all that Three ever saw was Count Proteus. He was cold, Joe, cold as ice! I thought of all those years I was alone, and frightened . . . the things I did to stay alive . . . while Three was together, never feeling that awful loneliness. I wanted to kill him, one by one." She rose and stood with her fists clenched, ramrod stiff from head to foot. "I thought about it every day. I planned it to the last detail. But I never really meant to do it, Joe. Tonight I gave him one last chance. I dropped the mask. I played Ophelia as myself. I was sure he'd see who I really was. All I wanted was one

word, one look of recognition . . . and when it didn't come, I told myself that Three didn't deserve to live. It was no problem. I was Osric, remember? I handed out the foils. 'A hit, a very palpable hit,'" she cried in Osric's foppish voice, then turned to me<sup>3</sup>. "That's the whole story, Joe. Now you know. You've solved this case. And now let's go far away where no one will ever find us. Come on, Joe. Don't you want me?"

I<sup>3</sup> looked from her hair to her feet and up to her eyes again. "I do, Morgana. I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in the world. But the law wants you, too."

"Joe," she said softly, in a voice that was barely a whisper. "Joe, don't let it end like this. Please, Joe."

She reached out to me<sup>3</sup>. Just as our hands were about to touch, the door burst open. Lieutenant Chupka of Homicide and I<sup>1,2,4</sup> had arrived, right on time.

"Here's your murderer, Chupka," I<sup>3</sup> said. "Morgana Millwood, also known as Count Proteus. Her real name's Herbert Three<sup>1</sup>."

"All right, Kilborn," Chupka said. He nodded, and two policemen took Millwood by the arms and led her out. She didn't look at me<sup>3</sup>.

"Go easy," I<sup>3</sup> said. "She had a pretty good reason for killing him."

"They always do, don't they?" Chupka pushed his hat back and surveyed the room. The little suitcase caught his eye. "Looks like she was getting ready to skip. Alone?"

"I don't know. You'll have to ask her," I<sup>3</sup> said.

"That was fast work, Kilborn. How did you figure this one out?"

I<sup>3</sup> said, "It was easy."

"Easy?"

I<sup>2</sup> shrugged. "She killed Three and she's going over for it."

Chupka nodded. "Yeah. A fine-looking woman, too. It's a shame."

I<sup>4</sup> looked after her thoughtfully and murmured, "A lovely woman, with a face that a man might die for."

"Three did," Chupka growled. Turning to me<sup>3</sup>, he added, "But you got her, Kilborn. Nice work. You must feel pretty good."

I<sup>3</sup> turned away without answering and went to the window. I<sup>3</sup> didn't feel good. I<sup>3</sup> felt a way I<sup>3</sup> never felt before, a way I<sup>3</sup> thought only a solo could feel.

I<sup>3</sup> felt lonely. ♦

# Arms and the Woman

James Morrow

"What did you do in the war, Mommy?"

The last long shadow has slipped from the sundial's face hours ago, melting into the hot Egyptian night. My children should be asleep. Instead they're bouncing on their straw pallets, stalling for time.

"It's late," I reply. "Nine o'clock already."

"Please," the twins implore me in a single voice.

"You have school tomorrow."

"You haven't told us a story all week," insists Damon, the whiner.

"The war is such a *great* story," explains Daphne, the wheedler.

"Kaptah's mother tells *him* a story every night," whines Damon.

"Tell us about the war," wheedles Daphne, "and we'll clean the whole cottage tomorrow, top to bottom."

I realize I'm going to give in—not because I enjoy spoiling my children (though I do) or because the story itself will consume less time than further negotiations (though it will) but because I actually want the twins to hear this particular tale. It has a point. I've told it before, of course, a dozen times perhaps, but I'm still not sure they get it.

I snatch up the egg-timer and



Illustration by Jerry Lee

invert it on the nightstand, the tiny grains of sand spilling into the lower chamber like seeds from a farmer's palm. "Be ready for bed in three minutes," I warn my children, "or no story."

They scurry off, frantically brushing their teeth and slipping on their flaxen nightshirts. Silently I glide about the cottage, dousing the lamps and curtaining the moon, until only one candle lights the twins' room, like the campfire of some small, pathetic army, an army of mice or scarab beetles.

"So you want to know what I did in the war," I intone, singsong, as my children climb into their respective beds.

"Oh, yes," says Damon, pulling up his fleecy coverlet. "You bet," says Daphne, fluffing her goose-feather pillow.

"Once upon a time," I begin, "I lived as both princess and prisoner in the great city of Troy." Even in this feeble light, I'm struck with how handsome Damon is, how beautiful Daphne. "Every evening, I would sit in my boudoir, looking into my polished bronze mirror. . . ."

Helen of Troy, princess and prisoner, sits in her boudoir, looking into her polished bronze mirror and scanning her world-class face for symptoms of age—for wrinkles, wattles, pouches, crow's feet, and the crenelated corpses of hairs. She feels like crying, and not just because these past ten years in Ilium are starting to show. She's sick of the whole sordid arrangement, sick of being cooped up in this overheated acropolis like a pet cockatoo. Whispers haunt the citadel. The servants are gossiping, even her own handmaids. The whore of Hisarlik, they call her. The slut from Sparta. The Lakedaimon lay.

Then there's Paris. Sure, she's madly in love with him, sure, they have great sex, but can't they ever *talk*?

Sighing, Helen trolls her hairdo with her long, lean, exquisitely manicured fingers. A silver strand lies amid the folds like a predatory snake. Slowly she winds the offending filament around her index finger, then gives it a sudden tug. "Ouch," she cries, more from despair than pain. There are times when Helen feels like tearing all her lovely tresses out, every last lock, not simply these graying tresses. If I have to spend one more pointless day in Hisarlik, she tells herself, I'll go mad.

Every morning, she and Paris enact the same depressing ritual. She escorts him to the Skaian Gate, hands him his spear and his lunch bucket, and with a quick tepid kiss sends him off to work. Paris's job is killing people. At sundown he arrives home grubby with blood and redolent of funeral pyres, his spear wrapped in bits of drying viscera. There's a war going on out there: Paris won't tell her anything more. "Who are we fighting?" she asks each evening as they lie together in bed. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about it," he replies, slipping on a sheepgut condom, the brand with the plumed and helmeted soldier on the box.

Until this year, Paris wanted her to walk Troy's high walls each morning, waving encouragement to the troops, blowing them kisses as they marched off to battle. "Your face inspires them," he would insist. "An airy

kiss from you is worth a thousand nights of passion with a nymph." But in recent months Paris's priorities have changed. As soon as they say good-bye, Helen is supposed to retire to the citadel, speaking with no one, not even a brief coffee klatch with one of Paris's forty-nine sisters-in-law. She's expected to spend her whole day weaving rugs, carding flax, and being beautiful. It is not a life.

Can the gods help? Helen is skeptical, but anything is worth a try. Tomorrow, she resolves, she will go to the temple of Apollo and beg him to relieve her boredom, perhaps buttressing her appeal with an offering—a ram, a bull, whatever—though an offering strikes her as rather like a deal, and Helen is sick of deals. Her husband—pseudohusband, nonhusband—made a deal. She keeps thinking of the Apple of Discord, and what Aphrodite might have done with it after bribing Paris. Did she drop it in her fruit bowl . . . put it on her mantle . . . impale it on her crown? Why did she take the damn thing seriously? Why did any of them take it seriously? Hi, I'm the fairest goddess in the universe—see, it says so right here on my apple.

Damn—another gray hair, another weed in the garden of her pulchritude. She reaches toward the villain—and stops. Why bother? These hairs are like the hydra's heads, endless, cancerous, and besides, it's high time Paris realized there's a mind under that coiffure.

Whereupon Paris comes in, sweating and snorting. His helmet is awry; his spear is gory; his greaves are sticky with other men's flesh.

"Hard day, dear?"

"Don't ask." Her nonhusband unfastens his breastplate. "Pour us some wine. Looking in the speculum, were you? Good."

Helen sets the mirror down, uncorks the bottle, and fills two bejeweled goblets with Chateau Samothrace.

"Today I heard about some techniques you might try," says Paris. "Ways for a woman to retain her beauty."

"You mean—you *talk* on the battlefield?"

"During the lulls."

"I wish you'd talk to *me*."

"Wax," says Paris, lifting the goblet to his lips. "Wax is the thing." His heavy jowls undulate as he drinks. Their affair, Helen will admit, still gives her a kick. In the last ten years, her lover has moved beyond the surpassing prettiness of an Adonis into something equally appealing, an authoritative, no-frills sexuality suggestive of an aging matinee idol. "Take some melted wax and work it into the lines in your brow—presto, they're gone."

"I *like* my lines," Helen insists with a quick but audible snort.

"When mixed with ox blood, the dark silt from the River Minyeios is indelible, they say. You can dye your silver hairs back to auburn. A Grecian formula." Paris sips his wine. "As for those redundant ounces on your thighs, well, dear, we both know there's no cure like exercise."

"Look who's talking," Helen snaps. "Your skin is no bowl of cream. Your head is no garden of sarraceno. As for your stomach, it's a safe bet that Paris of Troy can walk through the rain without getting his buckle wet."

The prince finishes his wine and sighs. "Where's the girl I married? You used to care about your looks."

"The girl you married," Helen replies pointedly, "is not your wife."

"Well, yes, of course not. Technically, you're still *bis*."

"I want a wedding." Helen takes a gluttonous swallow of Samothrace and sets the goblet on the mirror.

"You could go to my husband," she suggests. "You could present yourself to high-minded Menelaus and try to talk things out." Reflected in the mirror's wobbly face, the goblet grows weird, twisted, as if seen through a drunkard's eyes. "Hey, listen, I'll bet he's found another maid by now—he's something of a catch, after all. So maybe you actually did him a favor. Maybe he isn't even mad."

"He's mad," Paris insists. "The man is angry."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Heedless of her royal station, Helen consumes the remainder of her wine with the crude insouciance of a galley slave. "I want a baby," she says.

"What?"

"You know: a baby. *Baby*: a highly young person. My goal, dear Paris, is to be pregnant."

"Fatherhood is for losers." Paris chucks his spear onto the bed. Striking the mattress, the oak shaft disappears into the soft down. "Go easy on the *vino*, love. Alcohol is awfully fattening."

"Don't you understand? I'm losing my mind. A pregnancy would give me a sense of purpose."

"Any idiot can sire a child. It takes a hero to defend a citadel."

"Have you found someone else, Paris? Is that it? Someone younger and thinner?"

"Don't be foolish. Throughout the whole of time, in days gone by and eras yet to come, no man will love a woman as much as Paris loves Helen."

"I'll bet the plains of Ilium are crawling with camp followers. They must swoon over you."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about it," says Paris, unwrapping a plumed-soldier condom.

If he ever says that to me again, Helen vows as they tumble drunkenly into bed, I'll scream so loud the walls of Troy will fall.

The slaughter is not going well, and Paris is depressed. By his best reckoning, he's dispatched only fifteen Achaeans to the house of Hades this morning: strong-graved Machaon, iron-muscled Euchenor, ax-wielding Deichos, a dozen more—fifteen noble warriors sent to the dark depths, fifteen breathless bodies left to nourish the dogs and ravens. It is not enough.

All along the front, Priam's army is giving ground without a fight. Their morale is low, their *esprit* spent. They haven't seen Helen in a year, and they don't much feel like fighting anymore.

With a deep Aeolian sigh, the prince seats himself atop his pile of confiscated armor and begins his lunch break.

Does he have a choice? Must he continue keeping her in the shadows? Yes, by Poseidon's trident—yes. Ex-

hibiting Helen as she looks now would just make matters worse. Once upon a time, her face launched a thousand ships. Today it couldn't get a Theban fishing schooner out of dry dock. Let the troops catch only a glimpse of her wrinkles, let them but glance at her aging hair, and they'll start deserting like rats leaving a foundering trireme.

He's polishing off a peach—since delivering his famous verdict and awarding Aphrodite her prize, Paris no longer cares for apples—when two of the finest horses in Hisarlik, Aithon and Xanthos, gallop up pulling his brother's war chariot. He expects to see Hector holding the reins, but no: the driver, he notes with a sharp pang of surprise, is Helen.

"Helen? What are *you* doing here?"

Brandishing a cowhide whip, his lover jumps down. "You won't tell me what this war is about," she gasps, panting inside her armor, "so I'm investigating on my own. I just came from the swift-flowing Menderes, where your enemies are preparing to launch a cavalry charge against the camp of Epistrophos."

"Go back to the citadel, Helen. Go back to Pergamos."

"Paris, this army you're battling—they're *Greeks*. Idomeneus, Diomedes, Sthenelos, Euryalos, Odysseus—I *know* these men. Know them? By Pan's flute, I've *dated* half of them. You'll never guess who's about to lead that cavalry charge."

Paris takes a stab. "Agamemnon?"

"Agamemnon!" Sweat leaks from beneath Helen's helmet like blood from a scalp wound. "My own brother-in-law! Next you'll be telling me Menelaus himself has taken the field against Troy!"

Paris coughs and says, "Menelaus himself has taken the field against Troy."

"He's here?" wails Helen, thumping her breastplate. "My husband is *here*?"

"Correct."

"What's going on, Paris? For what purpose have the men of horse-pasturing Argos come all the way to Ilium?"

The prince bounces his peach pit off Helen's breastplate. Angrily he fishes for epithets. Mule-minded Helen, he calls her beneath his breath. Leather-skinned Lakedaimon, runs his internal invective. He feels beaten and bettered, trapped and tethered. "Very well, sweetheart, very well. . . ." Helen of the iron will, the hard ass, the bronze bottom. "They've come for *you*, love."

"What?"

"For you."

"Me? What are you talking about?"

"They want to steal you back." As Paris speaks, Helen's waning beauty seems to drop another notch. Her face darkens with some unfathomable mix of anger, hurt, and confusion. "They're pledged to it. King Tyndareus made your suitors swear they'd be loyal to whomever you selected as husband."

"*Me*?" Helen leaps into the chariot. "You're fighting an entire, stupid, disgusting war for *me*?"

"Well, not for you per se. For honor, for glory, for arete. Now hurry off to Pergamos—that's an order."

"I'm hurrying off, dear"—she raises her whip—"but

not to Pergamos. On, Aithon!" She snaps the lash. "On, Xanthos!"

"Then where?"

Instead of answering, Paris's lover speeds away, leaving him to devour her dust.

Dizzy with outrage, trembling with remorse, Helen charges across the plains of Ilium. On all sides, an astonishing drama plays itself out, a spectacle of shattered senses and violated flesh: soldiers with eyes gouged out, tongues cut loose, limbs hacked off, bellies ripped open; soldiers, as it were, giving birth to their own bowels—all because of her. She weeps openly, profusely, the large gemlike tears running down her wrinkled cheeks and striking her breastplate. The agonies of Prometheus are a picnic compared to the weight of her guilt, the Pillars of Herakles are feathers when balanced against the crushing tonnage of her conscience.

Honor, glory, arete: I'm missing something, Helen realizes as she surveys the carnage. The essence eludes me.

She reaches the thick and stinking Ligar Marsh and reins up before a foot soldier sitting in the mud, a young Mymiglon with what she assumes are a particularly honorable spear hole in his breastplate and a singularly glorious lack of a right hand.

"Can you tell me where I might find your king?" she asks.

"By Hera's eyes, you're easy to look at," gasps the soldier as, arete in full bloom, he binds his bleeding stump with linen.

"I need to find Menelaus."

"Try the harbor," he says, gesturing with his wound. The bandaged stump drips like a leaky faucet. "His ship is the *Arkadia*."

Helen catches the soldier and aims her horses toward the wine-dark sea.

"Are you Helen's mother, by any chance?" he calls as she races off. "What a face you've got!"

Twenty minutes later, reeling with thirst and smelling of horse sweat, Helen pulls within view of the crashing waves. In the harbor beyond, a thousand strong-hulled ships lie at anchor, their masts jutting into the sky like a forest of denuded trees. All along the beach, Helen's countrymen are raising a stout wooden wall, evidently fearful that, if the line is ever pushed back this far, the Trojans will not hesitate to burn the fleet. The briny air rings with the Achaeans' axes—with the thud and crunch of acacias being felled, palisades being whittled, stockade posts sharpened, breastworks shaped, a cacophony muffling the flutter of the sails and the growl of the surf.

Helen starts along the wharf, soon spotting the *Arkadia*, a stout pentekontor with half a hundred oars bristling from her sides like the quills of a hedgehog. No sooner has she crossed the gangplank when she comes upon her husband, older now, striated by wrinkles, but still unquestionably he. Plumed like a peacock, Menelaus stands atop the forecabin, speaking with a burly construction brigade, tutoring them in the proper placement of the impalement stakes. A handsome man, she decides, much like the warrior on the condom boxes.

She can see why she picked him over Sthenelos, Euryalos, and her other beaux.

As the workers set off to plant their spiky groves, Helen saunters up behind Menelaus and taps him on the shoulder.

"Hi," she says.

He was always a wan fellow, but now his face loses whatever small quantity of blood it once possessed.

"Helen?" he says, gasping and blinking like a man who's just been doused with a bucket of slop. "Is that *you*?"

"Right."

"You've, er . . . aged."

"You too, sweetheart."

He pulls off his plumed helmet, stomps his foot on the forecastle, and says, angrily, "You ran out on me."

"Yes. Quite so."

"Trollop."

"Perhaps," Helen adjusts her greaves. "I could claim I was bewitched by laughter-loving Aphrodite, but that would be a lie. The fact is, Paris knocked me silly. I'm crazy about him. Sorry." She runs her desiccated tongue along her parched lips. "Have you got anything to drink?"

Dipping a hollow gourd into his private cistern, Menelaus offers her a pint of fresh water. "So what brings you here?" he asks.

Helen receives the ladle. Setting her boots wide apart, she steadies herself against the roll of the incoming tide and takes a greedy gulp. At last she says, "I wish to give myself up."

"What?"

"I want to go home with you."

"You mean—you think our marriage deserves another chance?"

"No, I think all those infantrymen out there deserve to live. If this war is really being fought to retrieve me, then consider the job done."

Tossing the ladle aside, Helen holds out her hands, palms turned upward as if she's testing for raindrops. "I'm yours, hubby. Manacle my wrists, chain my feet together, throw me in the brig."

Against all odds, defying all *logos*, Menelaus's face loses more blood. "I don't think that's a very good idea," he says.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"This siege, Helen—there's more to it than you suppose."

"Don't jerk me around, lord of all Lakedaimon, asshole. It's time to call it quits."

The Spartan king stares straight at her chest, a habit she's always found annoying. "Put on a bit of weight, eh, darling?"

"Don't change the subject." She lunges toward Menelaus's scabbard as if to goose him, but instead draws out his sword. "I'm deadly serious: if Helen of Troy is not permitted to live with herself—she pantomimes the act of self-slaughter—"then she will die with herself."

"Tell you what," says her husband, taking his weapon back. "Tomorrow morning, first thing, I'll go to my brother and ask him to arrange a truce with your father-in-law."

"He's not my father-in-law. There was never a wedding."  
"Whatever. The point is, your offer has merit, but it must be discussed. We shall all meet face-to-face, Trojans and Achaeans, and talk the matter over. As for now, you'd best return to your lover."

"I'm warning you—I shall abide no more blood on my hands, none but my own."

"Of course, dear. Now please go back to the citadel."  
At least he listened, Helen muses as she crosses the weatherworn deck of the *Arkadia*. At least he didn't tell me not to worry my pretty little head about it.

"Here comes the dull part," says whiny-tongued Damon.  
"The scene with all the talking," adds smart-mouthed Daphne.

"Can you cut it a bit?" my son asks.

"Hush," I say, smoothing out Damon's coverlet. "No interruptions," I insist. I slip Daphne's cornhusk doll under her arm. "When you have your own children, you can tell the tale however you like. As for now, listen carefully. You might learn something."

By the burbling, tumbling waters of the River Simois, beneath the glowing orange avatar of the moon goddess Artemis, ten aristocrats are gathered around a vast oaken table in the purple tent of Ilium's high command, all of them bursting with opinions on how best to deal with this Helen situation, this peace problem, this Trojan hostage crisis. White as a crane, a banner of truce flaps above the heads of the two kings, Priam from the high city, Agamemnon from the long ships. Each side has sent its best and/or brightest. For the Trojans: brainy Panthoos, mighty Paris, invincible Hector, and Hiketaon the scion of Ares. For the Achaeans: Ajax the berserker, Nestor the mentor, Menelaus the cuckold, and wily, smiling Odysseus. Of all those invited, only quarrelsome Achilles, sulking in his tent, has declined to appear.

Panthoos rises, rubs his foam-white beard, and sets his scepter on the table. "Royal captains, gifted seers," the old Trojan begins, "I believe you will concur when I say that, since this siege was laid, we have not faced a challenge of such magnitude. Make no mistake: Helen means to take our war away from us, and she means to do so immediately."

Gusts of dismay waff through the tent like a wind from the underworld.

"We can't quit now," groans Hector, wincing fiercely.  
"We're just getting up to speed," wails Hiketaon, grimacing greatly.

Agamemnon steps down from his throne, carrying his scepter like a spear. "I have a question for Prince Paris," he says. "What does your mistress's willingness to return to Argos say about the present state of your relationship?" Paris strokes his great jowls and says, "As you might surmise, great King, my feelings for Helen are predicated on requirement."

"So you won't keep her in Pergamos by force?"

"If she doesn't want me, then I don't want her."

At which point slug-witted Ajax raises his hand. "Er, excuse me. I'm a bit confused. If Helen is ours for the

asking, then why must we continue the war?"

A sirocco of astonishment arises among the heroes.

"Why?" gasps Panthoos. "Why? Because this is *Troy*, that's why. Because we're kicking off Western Civilization here, that's why. The longer we can keep this affair going, the longer we can sustain such an ambiguous enterprise, the more valuable and significant it becomes."

Slow-synapsed Ajax says, "Huh?"

Nestor has but to clear his throat and every eye is upon him. "What our adversary is saying—may I interpret, wise Panthoos?" He turns to his Trojan counterpart, bows deferentially, and, receiving a nod of assent, speaks to Ajax. "Panthoos means that, if this particular pretext for war—restoring a woman to her rightful owner—can be made to seem reasonable, then any pretext for war can be made to seem reasonable." The mentor shifts his fevered stare from Ajax to the entire assembly. "By rising to this rare and precious occasion, we shall pave the way for wars of religion, wars of manifest destiny—any equivocal cause you care to name." Once again his gaze alights on Ajax. "Understand, sir? This is the war to inaugurate war itself. This is the war to make the world safe for war."

Ajax frowns so vigorously his visor falls down. "All I know is, we came for Helen and we got her. Mission accomplished." Turning to Agamemnon, the berserker lifts the visor from his eyes. "So if it's all the same to you, Majesty, I'd like to go home before I get killed."

"O, Ajax, Ajax, Ajax," moans Hector, pulling an arrow from his quiver and using it to scratch his back. "Where is your aesthetic sense? Have you no appreciation of war for the sake of war? The plains of Ilium are roiling with glory, sir. You could cut the arete with a knife. Never have there been such valiant eviscerations, such venerable dismemberments, such—"

"I don't get it," says the berserker. "I just don't get it."

Whereupon Menelaus slams his wine goblet on the table with a resounding thunk. "We have not gathered in Priam's tent so that Ajax might learn politics," he says impatiently. "We have gathered so that we might best dispose of my wife."

"True, true," says Hector.

"So what are we going to do, gentlemen?" asks Menelaus. "Lock her up?"

"Good idea," says Hiketaon.

"Well, yes," says Agamemnon, slumping back onto his throne. "Except that, when the war finally ends, my troops will demand to see her. Might they not wonder why so much suffering and sacrifice was spent on a goddess gone to seed? He turns to Paris and says, 'Prince, you should not have let this happen.'"

"Let *what* happen?" asks Paris.

"I heard she has wrinkles," says Agamemnon.

"I heard she got fat," says Nestor.

"What have you been feeding her?" asks Menelaus.

"Bonbons?"

"She's a *person*," protests Paris, "she's not a marble statue. You can hardly blame *me* . . ."

At which juncture King Priam raises his scepter and, as if to wound Gaia herself, rams it into the dirt.

"Noble lords, I hate to say this, but the threat is more immediate than you might suppose. In the early years of the siege, the sight of fair Helen walking the ramparts did wonders for my army's morale. Now that she's no longer fit for public display, well . . ."

"Yes?" says Agamemnon, steeling himself for the worst.

"Well, I simply don't know how much longer Troy can hold up its end of the war. If things don't improve, we may have to capitulate by next winter."

Gasps of horror blow across the table, rattling the tent flaps and ruffling the aristocrats' capes. But now, for the first time, clever, canny Odysseus addresses the council, and the winds of discontent grow still. "Our course is obvious," he says. "Our destiny is clear," he asserts. "We must put Helen—the old Helen, the pristine Helen—back on the walls."

"The old Helen?" says Hiketaon. "The pristine Helen? Are you not talking fantasy, resourceful Odysseus? Are you not singing a myth?"

The lord of all Ithaca strolls the length of Priam's tent, massaging his silky beard. "It will require some wisdom from Pallas Athena, some technology from Hephaestus, but I believe the project is possible."

"Excuse me," says Paris. "What project is possible?"

"Refurbishing your little harlot," says Odysseus. "Making the dear, sweet trumpet shine like new."

Back and forth, to and fro, Helen moves through her boudoir, wearing a ragged path of *angst* into the carpet. An hour passes. Then two. Why are they taking so long?

What most gnaws at her, the thought that feasts on her entrails, is the possibility that, should the council not accept her surrender, she will have to raise the stakes. And how might she accomplish the deed? By what means might she book passage on Charon's one-way ferry? Something from her lover's arsenal, most likely—a sword, spear, dagger, or death-dripping arrow. O, please, my lord Apollo, she prays to the city's prime protector, don't let it come to that.

At sunset Paris enters the room, his pace leaden, his jaws dragging his mouth into a grimace. For the first time ever, Helen observes tears in her lover's eyes.

"It is finished," he moans, doffing his plumed helmet. "Peace has come. At dawn you must go to the long ships. Menelaus will bear you back to Sparta, where you will once again live as mother to his children, friend to his concubines, and emissary to his bed."

Relief pours out of Helen in a deep, orgasmic rush, but the pleasure is short-lived. She loves this man, flaws and all, flab and the rest. "I shall miss you, dearest Paris," she tells him. "Your bold abduction of me remains the peak experience of my life."

"I agreed to the treaty only because Menelaus believes you might otherwise kill yourself. You're a surprising woman, Helen. Sometimes I think I hardly know you."

"Hush, my darling," she says, gently laying her palm across his mouth. "No more words." Slowly they unclothe each other, methodically unlocking the doors to

bliss, the straps and sashes, the snaps and catches, and thus begins their final, epic night together.

"I'm sorry I've been so judgmental," says Paris.

"I accept your apology," says Helen.

"You are so beautiful," he tells her. "So impossibly beautiful . . ."

As dawn's rosy fingers stretch across the Trojan sky, Hector's faithful driver, Eniopeus the son of horse-loving Thebaïos, steers his sturdy war chariot along the banks of the Menderes, bearing Helen to the Achaian stronghold. They reach the *Arkadia* just as the sun is cresting, so their arrival in the harbor becomes a flaming parade, a show of sparks and gold, as if they ride upon the burning wheels of Hyperion himself.

Helen starts along the dock, moving past the platoons of squawking gulls adrift on the early morning breeze. Menelaus comes forward to greet her, accompanied by a man for whom Helen has always harbored a vague dislike—broad-chested, black-bearded Teukros, illegitimate son of Telemon.

"The tide is ripe," says her husband. "You and Teukros must board forthwith. You will find him a lively traveling companion. He knows a hundred fables and plays the harp."

"Can't you take me home?"

Menelaus squeezes his wife's hand and, raising it to his lips, plants a gentle kiss. "I must see to the loading of my ships," he explains, "the disposition of my battalions—a full week's job, I'd guess."

"Surely you can leave that to Agamemnon."

"Give me seven days, Helen. In seven days I'll be home, and we can begin picking up the pieces."

"We're losing the tide," says Teukros, anxiously intertwining his fingers.

Do I trust my husband? wonders Helen as she strides up the *Arkadia's* gangplank. Does he really mean to lift the siege?

All during their slow voyage out of the harbor, Helen is haunted. Nebulous fears, nagging doubts, and odd presentiments swarm through her brain like Harpies. She beseeches her beloved Apollo to speak with her, calm her, assure her all is well, but the only sounds reaching her ears are the creaking of the oars and the windy, watery voice of the Hellespont.

By the time the *Arkadia* finds the open sea, Helen has resolved to jump overboard and swim back to Troy.

"And then Teukros tried to kill you," says Daphne.

"He came at you with his sword," adds Damon.

This is the twins' favorite part, the moment of grue and gore. Eyes flashing, voice climbing to a melodramatic pitch, I tell them how, before I could put my escape plan into action, Teukros began chasing me around the *Arkadia*, slashing his Janus-faced blade. I tell them how I got the upper hand, tripping the bastard as he was about to run me through.

"You stabbed him with his own sword, didn't you, Mommy?" asks Damon.

"I had no choice. You understand that, don't you?"

"And then his guts spilled, huh?" asks Daphne. "Agamemnon had ordered Teukros to kill me," I explain. "I was ruining everything."

"They spilled out all over the deck, right?" asks Damon.

"Yes, dear, they certainly did. I'm quite convinced Paris wasn't part of the plot, or Menelaus either. Your mother falls for fools, not homicidal maniacs."

"What color were they?" asks Damon.

"Color?"

"His guts."

"Red, mostly, with daubs of purple and black."

"Neat."

I tell the twins of my long, arduous swim through the strait.

I tell them how I crossed Ilium's war-torn fields, dodging arrows and eluding patrols.

I tell how I waited by the Skaian Gate until a farmer arrived with a cartload of provender for the besieged city . . . how I sneaked inside the walls, secluded amid stalks of wheat . . . how I went to Pergamos, hid myself in the temple of Apollo, and breathlessly waited for dawn.

Dawn comes up, binding the eastern clouds in crimson girdles. Helen leaves the citadel, tiptoes to the wall, and mounts the hundred granite steps to the battlements. She is not sure of her next move. She has some vague hope of addressing the infantrymen as they assemble at the gate. Her arguments have failed to impress the generals, but perhaps she can touch the heart of the common soldier.

It is at this ambiguous point in her fortunes that Helen runs into herself.

She blinks—once, twice. She swallows a sphere of air. Yes, it is she, herself, marching along the parapets. Herself? No, not exactly: an idealized rendition of herself, the Helen of ten years ago, svelte and smooth.

As the troops march through the portal and head toward the plain, the strange incarnation calls down to them.

"Onward, men!" it shouts, raising a creamy-white arm. "Fight for me!" Its movements are deliberate and jerky, as if sunbaked Troy has been magically transplanted to some frigid clime. "I'm worth it!"

The soldiers turn, look up. "We'll fight for you, Helen!" a Bowman calls toward the parapets.

"We love you!" a sword-wielder shouts.

Awkwardly, the incarnation waves. Creakily, it blows an arid kiss. "Onward, men! Fight for me! I'm worth it!"

"You're beautiful, Helen!" a spear-thrower cries.

Helen strides up to her doppelgänger and, seizing the left shoulder, pivots the creature toward her.

"Onward, men!" it tells Helen. "Fight for me! I'm worth it!"

"You're beautiful," the spear-thrower continues, "and so is your mother!"

The eyes, Helen is not surprised to discover, are glass. The limbs are fashioned from wood, the head from marble, the teeth from ivory, the lips from wax, the tresses from the fleece of a darkling ram. Helen does

not know for certain what forces power this creature, what magic moves its tongue, but she surmises that the genius of Athena is at work here, the witchery of ox-eyed Hera. Chop the creature open, she senses, and out will pour a thousand cogs and pistons from Hephaestus's fiery workshop.

Helen wastes no time. She hugs the creature, lifts it off its feet. Heavy, but not so heavy as to dampen her resolve.

"Onward, men!" it screams as Helen throws it over her shoulder. "Fight for me! I'm worth it!"

And so it comes to pass that, on a hot, sweaty, Asia Minor morning, fair Helen turns the tables on history, gleefully abducting herself from the lofty stone city of Troy.

Paris is pulling a poisoned arrow from his quiver, intent on shooting a dollop of hemlock into the breast of an Achaian captain, when his brother's chariot charges by.

Paris nocks the arrow. He glances at the chariot.

He aims.

Glances again.

Fires. Misses.

Helen.

Helen? *Helen*, by Apollo's lyre, his Helen—no, two Helens, the true and the false, side by side, the true guiding the horses into the thick of the fight, her wooden twin staring dreamily into space. Paris is not sure which woman he is more astonished to see.

"Soldiers of Troy!" cries the fleshly Helen. "Heroes of Argos! Behold how your leaders seek to dupe you! You are fighting for a fraud, a swindle, a thing of gears and glass!"

A stillness envelops the battlefield. The men are stunned, not so much by the ravings of the charioteer as by the face of her companion, so pure and perfect despite the leather thong sealing her jaw shut. It is a face to sheathe a thousand swords, a face to lower a thousand spears, a face to unnock a thousand arrows.

Which is exactly what now happens. A thousand swords: sheathed. A thousand spears: lowered. A thousand arrows: unnocked.

The soldiers crowd around the chariot, pawing at the ersatz Helen. They touch the wooden arms, caress the marble brow, stroke the ivory teeth, pat the waxen lips, squeeze the woolly hair, rub the glass eyes.

"See what I mean?" cries the true Helen. "Your kings are diddling you. . . ."

Paris can't help it: he's proud of her, by Hennes' wings. He's puffing up with admiration. This woman has nerve, this woman has arete, this woman has chutzpah.

This woman, Paris realizes as a fat, warm tear of nostalgia rolls down his cheek, is going to end the war.

"The end," I say.

"And then what happened?" Damon asks.

"Nothing. *Finitis*. Go to sleep."

"You can't fool us," says Daphne. "All sorts of things happened after that. You went to live on the island of Lesbos."

"Not immediately," I note. "I wandered the world for seven years, having many fine and fabulous adventures. Good night."

"And then you went to Lesbos," Daphne insists.

"And then *we* came into the world," Damon asserts.

"True," I say. The twins are always interested in how they came into the world. They never tire of hearing about it.

"The women of Lesbos import over a thousand liters of frozen semen annually," Damon explains to Daphne.

"From Thrace," Daphne explains to Damon.

"In exchange for olives."

"A thriving trade."

"Right, honey," I say. "Bedtime."

"And so you got pregnant," says Daphne.

"And had us," says Damon.

"And brought us to Egypt." Daphne tugs at my sleeve as if operating a bell rope. "I came out first, didn't I?" she says. "I'm the *oldest*."

"Yes, dear."

"Is that why I'm smarter than Damon?"

"You're both equally smart. I'm going to blow out the candle now."

Daphne hugs her cornhusk doll and says, "Did you really end the war?"

"The treaty was signed the day after I fled from Troy. Of course, peace didn't bring the dead back to life, but at least Troy was never sacked and burned. Now go to sleep—both of you."

Damon says, "Not before we've . . ."

"What?"

"You know."

"All right," I say. "One look. One quick peek, and then you're off to the land of Morpheus."

I saunter over to the closet and, drawing back the linen curtain, reveal my stalwart twin standing upright amid Daphne's dresses and Damon's robes. She smiles through the gloom. She's a tireless smiler, this woman.

"Hi, Aunt Helen!" says Damon as I throw the bronze toggle protruding from the nape of my sister's neck.

She waves to my children and says, "Onward, men! Fight for me!"

"You bet, Aunt Helen!" says Daphne.

"I'm worth it!" says my sister.

"You sure are!" says Damon.

"Onward, men! Fight for me! I'm worth it!"

I switch her off and close the curtain. Tucking in the twins, I give each a big soupy kiss on the cheek. "Love you, Daphne. Love you, Damon."

I start to douse the candle—stop. As long as it's on my mind, I should get the chore done. Returning to the closet, I push the curtain aside, lift the penknife from my robe, and pry open the blade. And then, as the Egyptian night grows moist and thick, I carefully etch yet another wrinkle across my sister's brow, right beneath her salt-and-pepper bangs.

It's important, after all, to keep up appearances. ♦

## Write Away!

If you're a reader of this magazine with something to say, and you're willing to share your thoughts in writing, we want to hear from you.

**Comments on the magazine and its content** are especially welcome now that AMAZING's Stories is coming out in a full-size, full-color format—we want to find out what you think of the new look. If it's not what you expected, then what *did* you expect? Which stories and features did you like, and which ones could you do without? To help us separate readers' comments from other mail we receive, please write "Letter to the Editor" in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope.

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# Shadow Album

James Alan Gardner

In the deserted city at the heart of Muta's Great Fog Bank, there is a sundial. Its face is marble, once polished, now rough and pitted with age. The metal of the central gnomon flakes with rust; it has bled a dull brown stain across the dial's gritty white face.

The sundial no longer tells the time—the perpetual fog smears Muta's hot blue sunlight into a diffuse grey that casts no shadows, even at midday.

I visit the sundial often; the sight of it calms me when the loneliness grows too strong. I find it comforting to think that even a sundial can stop. It seems to be a promise that no responsibility lasts forever.

Once, this city was home to a million beings. Green plants grew, animals basked at midday, the Mutan people cast shadows and shaded their eyes from the afternoon sun. Now, the only flora are lichens and fungus, and the only animals small scavengers that dart in and out of nests under the crumbled buildings. As for the Mutans, they cast their last shadows long ago.

I carry a camera with me wherever I go, and it is full of shadows. Some are recent—photographs I have taken to pass the time, to pretend that I have



Illustration by Pat Morrissy

chanced upon beauty in a rusted tangle of metal, an oddly shaped mushroom. Those are the reusable slots on the camera's recording diskette, shadows I discard as new ones catch my eye. But there is a set of pictures I have tagged to prevent overwriting, shadows cast before the last light left me. Now, as night falls and the ghosts struggle to wake themselves from their collective sleep, I put the diskette into the viewer in my hut and click through my little album.

*Picture 1—Exploration Team Harmony on the Plains of Expanding Accord:*

Twenty-two men and women stand in the center of a burnt field, the grass charred black by the heat of a Vac/ship's landing. The ship is gone now, back to the orbiting task force where a million colonists wait in suspended animation until Harmony Team certifies the planet safe. Our mission is considered a formality—satellites and robot probes have given Muta such a positive rating that supply caches have already been dropped at selected sites all over the planet. All the same, final approval for colonization rests entirely with our team and its superiors. We do not place blind trust in machines; it is a doctrine of our faith.

By the time this picture was taken, all that remained to be explored was the anomalous fog bank: cause unknown, unchanged by wind and sun, impenetrable to orbital eyes. We thought our investigation would be routine and painless.

The team members offer smiles for the camera, showing or not showing their teeth according to their chosen self-image. Most try not to squint, though the sun is in their eyes; they want to look good for the photograph.

Behind them is the skimmer assigned to fly the team to the Great Fog Bank. On the craft's fuselage, brown letters proclaim "Unity Task Force: Muta." Beneath the words are the twenty-two symbols of our totem-houses, the spirits that unite our people and set us apart from other human cultures in this galactic sector. The symbols attest that the world is more than a machine, and humans more than a meaty collection of chemicals. We of the Unity are a spiritual people.

Each symbol on the fuselage is carefully labeled: the Dancing Madman, the Ready Mage, the Blind Priestess, and so on. The Unity is relentless in labeling everything.

In the far background, beyond the landing strip, you can see the grassland that the Unity labeled the Plains of Expanding Accord. Amidst the thick band of green there is a single dab of brown—some inquisitive Mutan herd animal peering at all the curious activity happening around the base.

At first glance, the people posed in this picture may be indistinguishable. They are all uniformed in the same tan fatigues. They all look healthy and competent. But to my eyes, three people stand out from the rest. They stand together on the extreme right of the picture: a woman between two men.

The woman is Chiala, Archeology Officer, age 25. In the picture, her skin is the same glossy color as a chest-

nut fresh from its shell; but I remember it as dark honey, and I dream of the soft brownness of her hand resting lightly on my forearm. Her smile is wide and bright. Around her throat she wears a neckerchief, white linen printed with a pattern of orange flowers. The flowers are chrysanthemums, totem flowers of my birthmonth. I nearly told her this when I helped her choose the neckerchief on our last recreation leave, but I decided to hold my tongue. It pleased me to have this secret link to her that even she did not realize.

The man on her right is Planetology Officer MolanDif, the same age as Chiala. In the hand dangling at his side, he holds the Unity regulation manual for missions exploring earthlike environments. Harmony Team had completed three such assignments at the time the picture was taken, but MolanDif still consulted the manual regularly . . . not because he wanted to enforce the rules on his juniors but rather because he wanted to be sure of the rules himself. He was a man in constant need of specific instructions, of models to imitate. (His shirt is open low enough to reveal the steaming snout of a dragon tattooed on his chest. He once confessed to me he got that tattoo when he was a teenager; he had read somewhere that teenagers were supposed to do irrevocable things on impulse.)

The greying man on Chiala's left is Senior Orthodoxy Officer BarlDan, age forty-nine. Me. My smile is self-conscious and clumsy—the skimmer pilot who took the picture for me ordered us to crowd together, and I was keenly aware of the solid warmth of Chiala's body pressing against my arm. (After the picture was taken, she did not move away from the contact. I was the one who withdrew to attend to my duties.)

At one time, I could have named all the others in this picture. I still remember names, remember faces . . . but I become confused when I try to pair them. It panics me sometimes, the thought that I was supposed to safeguard all these souls, but now can't remember which man was the ceremonial castrato, which woman wore the mask of the Riven Tower. I think I know, yet I suspect that I *don't* know, that I am mistaken, that my memory rearranges itself when I sleep. I wake sometimes to find myself shouting at people who flee from me in my dreams.

The only other face I'm sure of is Junior Planetologist DiDeel, a young red-headed man grinning widely into the camera, his arm around the shoulder of the man beside him; and the only reason DiDeel retains a foothold in my mind is because he was the first to die. The others . . . dead too, officers, juniors, all dead, murdered in the fog, but I am losing them day by day and I cannot keep them with me.

In the extreme foreground of the picture, we have lined up our spirit masks. The masks are dormant, their inhabiting spirits forced into temporary exile by the brilliant sunlight. Their eyeholes are empty; they are merely constructions of paper and plastic, feather and foil.

Given a choice, I would have preferred not to take photographs of the masks; but some of the spirits were vain and demanded I take pictures of their mask-houses

as often as possible. I complied, as I always complied with the wishes of the masks. You cannot reason with a spirit.

*Picture 2—Chiala examining a Mutan statue:*

In the Mutan city within the fog, Chiala kneels at the base of a marble statue. She has arranged weak laser projectors to throw up a yellowy gridwork of cubes around the statue, each cube ten centimeters to the side. The statue is thus boxed into a phantom coordinate system that helps her make measurements.

The statue resembles others found all across the planet: a man-high figure that might be a lump of bread dough, surrounded by a surface that bristles with quills like those of a porcupine. The quills appear to be protrusions of internal bones, forming a type of articulated exoskeleton. The top of the body is clearly a head, with two widely spaced eyes, a cluster of nose-holes shielded by a thatch of quills, and a fully toothed mouth. No ears are visible.

This was our image of the beings who built the Mutan cities, though we did not know how accurately the statues depicted them. Perhaps Mutan art was not representational—perhaps we were seeing some abstract style that only marginally looked like the true Mutans, or it could be that all these statues were idols of some deity whose appearance was utterly unlike the people's. Perhaps they were not statues at all; they might be signposts, or notice boards, or equipment for a game.

The Mutans had vanished centuries before the Unity discovered the planet. It had happened abruptly, without property damage—a plague perhaps, a radiation disaster, or maybe mass suicide. The archeologists had many theories, but no evidence . . . only ruins, and a fog bank like a cloud of smoke after a great burning.

In the picture, Chiala holds a measuring tape to the pedestal that supports the statue. She has rolled up her sleeves. Some of the mist has condensed on her forearms, giving them a dark sheen, highlighting a line of sleek muscle from elbow to wrist. If I look at this picture too long, I find myself leaning forward to touch the viewer screen, to trace that line of muscle with my finger.

Chiala's eyes are on the work, not the camera. I approached her quietly through the fog; she did not see me watching.

*Picture 3—MolanDif's testing station on the Chastened River:*

The picture is taken from the top of the bank looking down toward the water. Eight team members are in sight. Most are on shore, fussing with electronic instruments I cannot name. DiDeel wears hip-waders and stands in the water up to his thighs; he is far enough away to be nearly lost in the fog. He holds a metal pole that stretches out into the mist and disappears. My guess would be that he is scooping a water sample from the middle of the river, but for all I know, he could be fishing.

The group is attempting to locate evidence of volcanic

hot springs in the river bed. The senior planetologists, up in orbit with the colonists, hypothesized that the fog bank was created by near-boiling water from springs mixing with near-freezing water running down from the Upward Potential Mountains. No one found the hypothesis persuasive, but it offered a foundation for conducting tests until new data suggested something better.

MolanDif is on the far right of the picture, paddling an inflatable dinghy out of the upstream mists. The dinghy is filled with testing equipment. He holds the paddle awkwardly.

When he caught sight of me watching, he hailed me and pulled in to shore. As I helped him out of the dinghy, he said, "Officer BarlDan, I'd like to consult with you."

"In official capacity?" I asked.

"Of course," he said, seemingly surprised that I might have an unofficial one. "When would be suitable?"

"I'm free now."

"Oh," he said. "Oh." He looked at the ground as if there might be something there that needed his attention. "All right, then." He paused again. "This is a private matter."

"We'll walk along the river," I said.

The Mutans had paved a wide promenade along the top of the bank, running completely across the city. Pot-holes were sunk in the asphalt here and there, and tough fungal growth was working up from below, cracking the surface into patterns like the glass in a smashed mirror; but walking was easy if you watched your step, and it provided a route away from the others without getting lost in the fog. We walked for some time in a silence that was overlaid with a background mutter of water, as I waited for MolanDif to begin the conversation.

"I have reached the age of twenty-five," he said at last. I knew that; his birthday had passed while we were in stasis on the way to Muta, but Harmony Team had danced in his honor shortly after we woke up. MolanDif continued, "The social adjustment manual says that twenty-five is the optimal age for marriage."

"To be precise," I said, "the manual says that twenty-five is the median age at which a human being has reached a level of maturity consistent with the obligations of intimate social partnership. Not the same thing."

"Still," he said, "I believe I am ready for marriage. I . . . I'm not fulfilled being alone. I think it would be better to be married."

"Are you unhappy?" I asked.

"Oh, no," he said quickly. "I'm quite well adjusted. To the situation. But I think . . . life could be *fuller*, you know? There's something . . ." He reached out with his hand and clutched an empty fist. "Life could be fuller," he repeated.

"Have you chosen a partner?"

"Chiala, of course," he answered, in a tone of surprise that I could consider any other alternative. "She's of equal rank. She's twenty-five."

"And she's beautiful," I said.

"Well, yes. But beauty . . . the manual says it's too shallow a reason for seeking marriage. Isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it is."

"Sexual attraction is an inadequate basis for dedicated partnership actualization. That's right in the manual. The manual stresses that feelings—you know, love . . ." His voice fell to near inaudibility on the word and he went on quickly. "Whatever you think you feel, it's only infatuation if you don't have a deeper basis for what you . . . what you want. I'm not just infatuated with her, BarlDan. I have good, deep reasons."

"She's of equal rank and she's twenty-five."

"Yes. You see how it makes sense?"

"Does it make sense to Chiala too?" I asked.

"I couldn't possibly discuss it with her until you've cross-matched our personality profiles," he said quickly. "If we aren't compatible in the eyes of the Unity . . . well, I couldn't pursue it, could I? I'd just . . . I couldn't pursue it. And if we are compatible, then I'd have something to say to her. It wouldn't be just me, I could say that the Unity officially thought we had a marriageability coefficient of ninety per cent. Or whatever it turns out to be. You understand?"

"Yes," I said. "I understand. I'll do the calculations for you."

He thanked me hastily and headed back to the investigation site almost at a run.

I should have told him I wanted her for myself, that she was a dancing flame which could never burn bright enough fueled by his soggy wood. But how was I any different?

*Picture 4—The interior of my hut, evening, first day within the fog.*

The picture is taken from the doorway. All the usual amenities are present: cot, sink, desk, two chairs, chemical toilet, mask shrine. On the desk, a lamp glows at minimum brightness; there are plenty of shadows here. The only other light comes from the candles on the shrine and their reflections in the shrine's mirror.

The juniors who put up the hut for me have placed my shrine so that the mask points toward the door. The face that was my second self looks almost directly into the camera. The eyes are not empty in this picture; they are filled with shadow. It is dusk and the mask is once again inhabited.

The mask belongs to the Hanged Prophet house. It is an adult male who calls himself ToPu. ToPu the Seer. ToPu the Abiding Observer. His umber papier-mâché face is runneled with crags that have been deepened with paint of blue and green. This shows age and therefore (so the theory goes) wisdom. But when the spirit of ToPu guided me to fashion his mask-home during my time of initiation, his hands were clumsy in affixing the garnet. The gem is centered properly on the forehead, but its setting is tipped to the left. Instead of facing outward, the capital facet looks ashamedly to one side.

For thirty-five years, this was what ToPu saw when he looked at himself in the mirror of my shrine: he saw that he was flawed. His little gem, his humble soul, was forever set askew. He felt that this was the kind of seer he was—one who never looked in quite the right direction.

And of course, ToPu's sadness infected my own life. BarlDan might progress through victories or defeats, but ToPu always shadowed me. I would sit before the mirror to don the mask (its interior smelling of paint, sweat, and resin) and in the moments that both BarlDan and ToPu shared my body, I would feel him tumbling down into heartsick shame at the sight of his face. Whenever I regained consciousness at the end of the Dance of the Arcana, I would find that ToPu had been standing apart from the others, simply watching.

All these feelings return when I look at this picture and see ToPu's imperfect face staring sadly back. If I had set up my room myself, I would have angled the shrine away from the door—I had no need to remind myself of the awkward earnest sharer of my soul. But I couldn't rearrange the furniture now: the juniors who set up the hut had seemed so proud of their work, I couldn't hurt their feelings.

Whenever I view this picture, I look at ToPu first, in order to save the most important detail for last. In the foreground, two chairs are turned to face each other. Draped over the back of the closer one is a white linen neckerchief printed with orange chrysanthemums.

Chiala left it behind after proposing marriage to me. It was her betrothal token. If I accepted her offer, I was to wear it so that all the camp would know of our engagement. Otherwise, I was to return it discreetly to her hut and leave it lying across her pillow.

I planned to give back the neckerchief the next night. Sooner would insult her, as if I thought her easy to reject. But I had already rejected her in my own mind more than a dozen times since she joined Harmony Team, even while I talked with her, watched her with hungry eyes, touched her with feigned casualness and felt her touch me.

She told me she loved me because I was gentle, kind, and vulnerable; but analysis of her personality profile revealed that she wanted a father figure who would absolve her from the responsibility of growing up. (I once dyed the grey in my hair, hoping she would be dazzled by a younger man. She was appalled that I would want to look like some unseasoned junior.)

I felt I loved her because she was intelligent, beautiful, and so very alive; but in fact, I was immaturely hoping she would rescue me from a self-centered loneliness from which I was too weak to extricate myself. (On our nights of quiet sociability, it was always she who sought me out. I could never bring myself to believe she would be happy to see me at her door.)

If we married, I thought, we would cling to each other too tightly, feeding on our weaknesses. We might be happy, but we would fold inward too much, dedicating ourselves to each other instead of the good of the Unity. In solitude, I had calculated our social coefficients many times before: love high, but social desirability just inside the bounds of legality. As Orthodox Officer, I could not give my approval.

Instead, I savored an aging coward's self-indulgent melancholy as I oh-so-carefully calculated the social coefficients for MolanDif and Chiala. The ratings were no

worse with him than with me; better on some scales. The two would never love each other, but they would make it work, without letting it interfere with their pursuit of the greater good.

I told myself that my duty was clear.

Still, I took this picture of the neckerchief so I could always remind myself that Chiala had once asked.

*Picture 5—Harmony Team singing around a campfire, first evening of the mission:*

The campfire roars high. It is a volcanic island of light, ringed by a lagoon of fog, enclosed in an ocean of blackness. The fire has been built inside a cracked concrete dish in the same park as the sundial; an archeologist conjectured that the dish was a reflecting pool in the days of Mutan civilization. It is surrounded by what seem to be low marble benches, but benches built for Mutan anatomy. Their tops resemble narrow U-shaped troughs.

The members of Harmony Team lounge on the benches in a variety of postures. Only Chiala looks comfortable. She sits with both legs tucked beneath her, hands in her lap. Her mouth is open wide and her head is tilted back for greater singing volume.

She could not sing. She was, in fact, tone-deaf. The notes she bawled so lustily bore no relationship to the tune the others sang. Chiala didn't care. Perhaps she didn't know—who would tell her? In an odd way, her handicap endeared her to the team, bringing her down from the heights of perfection and making her just a bit pitiable.

MolanDif sits awkwardly beside Chiala, his rump at the bottom of the trough, his legs dangling over the edge. The flames tint his face a jaundiced shade of orange. He is not singing; as I remember that night, he was barely breathing, hovering at Chiala's side all evening but struck speechless by the enormity of what he wanted to say.

From the angle I took this picture, I cannot tell if his thigh is touching her knee. Some nights I think yes, some nights I think no.

A number of team members appear to be in the Arcana trance already. The youth who beats the drum is clearly there. His glassy eyes stare blindly into the fire; his body is slack, though his arms continue to pound out the rhythms of attuning. The harpist too straddles the boundary between our world and the spirits'. Her shirt hangs open to bare the perspiration-slick boniness of her chest. A reflection of flame dances on her moist skin.

*Picture 6—Dance of the Arcana, first night of the mission:*

The picture shows a bare patch of dirt, not far from the campfire site. Candles are laid out on the ground in a spoked wheel around a silvery mirror-hall at the hub. The candles do not dispel the mist as the campfire did, though they force back the darkness a few paces. Fog

wraps and obscures the dancers, in lieu of the clothing they have shed.

Chiala's mask-self dances proud and beautiful in the foreground. When she proposed, Chiala gave me the name of her mask: Liljel. Liljel the Sun-Child. Liljel the Jewel. Her face is beaten gold, a mask of the Laughing Sun, lacquered black except for the rims of the eyes and a burnished band around the outer edge. The gem in Liljel's forehead is a topaz, and it is set perfectly straight.

Liljel dances, prances, alone. The picture captures her mid-leap, her front leg bent, her back leg straight. Her jump has such strength that her muscles stand out with sharp definition even in the fog. She throws her arms straining wide above her head. There is something about her that frightens me, a potential for cruelty in her self-absorption. She is always exultant, always alone. It is inconceivable that she would deign to dance with an ungainly old man.

Behind Liljel, MolanDif stands wearing his mask. The mask belongs to the house of the Worldly Cleric, black cloth embellished with spiraling traceries of silver thread. His gem, of course, is a diamond. In the picture, MolanDif prepares to leap in imitation of Liljel.

It is clear that MolanDif is himself . . . not in trance, not possessed by the mask. The fact is evident in the way he stands—self-conscious, a wary, soul-cluttered man attempting to imitate masks who are as simple as children. Liljel jumps and he follows like a shadow.

The doctrines of the Unity accept such people as they are. It is simply another sort of disability, like being unable to sing. Men and women who cannot lose themselves are as much a part of the orthodoxy as those who fall into trance effortlessly; they just don't know it. They torment themselves each night at the dance, watching the spontaneity of the others and guiltily going through the motions.

Not so different from ToPu, though ToPu was a true mask—less a wooden adult and more a sober child.

ToPu took this picture. He often played with my camera while the other masks danced. Only a few of his concrete memories ever leaked into my mind; one is the image of him standing apart from the dance, using the camera to click shot after shot of the other dancers.

In some way, ToPu believed that his watching protected the other mask-spirits—that they would wisp away to nothingness if someone didn't remove himself from the revelries and look on from the sidelines. If no one watched, the dance was random capering, dissipative frenzy . . . a meaningless hell. Someone had to see how a mask drew pictures in the dirt, someone had to hear it sing nonsense syllables to a stone. Being watched made it all real; taking pictures kept them safe.

There was seldom any logic in the pictures he took. When I put the diskette into the viewer on the morning after a dance, I might see a close-up of someone's hand, or a badly framed tangle of copulating bodies. I don't know if ToPu even understood what the camera did, for he never learned how to advance the diskette from shot to shot—each new shot overwrote the previous one, so that only the last shot of the night was preserved.

But ToPu didn't care about preserving pictures; he only cared about watching. The camera was a watching machine, and watching was ToPu's duty.

*Picture 7—The death of junior Planetologist DiDeel, during the Dance of the Arcana.*

I took this picture moments after waking from the trance. I believe ToPu saw the horror begin and surrendered the body to me prematurely, in the hope that BarlDan could cope with something ToPu could not.

I did not understand. I awoke sluggish, my mask beside me, my camera in hand. When I saw what was happening to DiDeel, my first reaction was to snap a picture, thinking I was seeing some remarkable atmospheric phenomenon.

The picture shows DiDeel frozen in the moment of transition from mask-self back to man. His mask belongs to the house of the Blind Priestess, an eyeless shell of pearly plastic with a wig of blended human hair reaching the ground in a blond-brown-red-black tumble. The mask is pushed far enough back on DiDeel's forehead that the man's mouth is uncovered. The mouth is open wide. He appears to be screaming.

That is what the camera recorded; but what my eyes saw was a stream of creamy mist pouring from his mouth like smoke belched by a fire-eater. The mist pierced the surrounding fog and sent it billowing outward in ripple after ripple. DiDeel made no sound but a choked crooning in his throat, like a heart sick child humming itself a lullaby.

All this . . . and my first reaction was merely to snap a picture. I found the sight odd but not at all disturbing, as if I were a four-year-old watching a favorite uncle do a magic trick. Accepting it all; almost absorbed. But when I look again at the picture, I cannot blind myself to DiDeel's agony. His body is bent backward as if some invisible assailant has wrapped one arm around his waist and is pressing the other hand on his sternum, pushing with full strength in an attempt to snap DiDeel's spine. The man is held impossibly off-balance, screaming without noise, the hair of his mask dragging in the dirt.

Yet in the moments after waking, I had a lingering feeling that this was very right, that I should want the same for myself.

DiDeel's body wavered in that pose for one second, two seconds, three, then jerked twice with the force of whiplacks. He heeled backward, striking the ground hard enough to scuff up a cloud of dust, and lay there limp as his hair.

It was only then that I put down the camera. I started shaking and couldn't stop.

A few of the masks came to look at the fallen body. Lilijel poked it with her finger once, then a second time much harder. I had to shout at her to go away and leave DiDeel alone.

Masks almost never understand death.

*Picture 8—Campfire, second night of the mission.*

A jump forward in time . . . but I was too busy to take pictures during the day after DiDeel's death. There were reports to file. There were morale restoration activities to run: a group contact experience in the morning, a unification dialogue at lunch, grief counseling sessions all afternoon. My hardest duty was calling my superiors in orbit, formally asking them to quarantine Muta until we had determined the cause of DiDeel's death. If this was some kind of disease, we could not risk infecting the main body of the task force. The mother ship offered to send us robots, medicines, any equipment we might need; but what could I ask for?

The picture around the campfire shows the team at the end of the day: haggard, subdued. Our Senior Medical Officer leans against the shoulder of the man beside her; her eyes are half-closed. She has not slept except for a three-hour nap I ordered her to take before supper. For the rest of the time, she and her junior have tried to determine why DiDeel died. No success.

Many of the other team members also show signs of exhaustion. No one slept well. DiDeel was popular, respected for his exceptional openness and generosity to all; his death struck hard. The majority of those around the fire simply stare into the flames, their expressions somber. The camera has caught one junior in the process of glancing over his shoulder into the fog.

The fog is thicker than the previous night. It crowds around us hungrily.

Chiala and MolanDif sit in almost the same positions as before. She is not singing—no one is singing—but she is speaking intensely to him, punctuating her words with a sharp gesture of her hands.

The neckerchief is around her throat.

I intended to take it to her hut and leave quickly without being seen . . . but the hut was full of her, the smell of her hair, a book she had been reading tossed casually aside, the imprint in the blankets where she recently had sat on the edge of her cot. As I laid the neckerchief across the pillow I could smell her everywhere, on the blankets, the linen, the talismans dangling from the headboard. A chocolate brown dress jacket was thrown across the top of her storage trunk; the sight of it brought back memories of her wearing it at celebration dinners, her eyes meeting mine as we drank from a shared chalice, her eyes, her skin, her skin the color of the jacket, her eyes . . . not one of these photos truly shows her eyes, not the way I want to remember them, how full they were with warmth and heat and fire. And my memory is slippery—in embarrassment and fear, it shies away from recalling the intensity of her gaze. I can see Chiala's face, but I can't look into her eyes.

She found me in her hut. I don't know how long I had been standing there. The neckerchief was in my hands, though I don't remember picking it up again. When I laid it down a second time, smoothing it out on the pillow, she asked why.

I had a speech practiced—not that I had planned to recite it to her, but because I had been constructing it

for my own benefit, putting the issues into well-chosen words that would show the wisdom of my decision. In the naked light of her eyes, the words and wisdom shattered. I could say nothing more than, "I'm sorry, I can't, not me," as I fled the hut.

The words of my rehearsed rationalizations came back like shouting ghosts as I retreated to my hut through the fog. "I love you so much I can't see you. I see your face, that's all. All I know of you is fragments—the warmth of your body, the smoothness of your bare shoulder, your off-key singing. I can't glue the fragments into a real woman. I'm blinded by love. I can't see, what am I loving but a voice, a perfume, the imagined kiss of your skin?"

The ghost words haunt me today as I view my photos and pretend that I have left my past behind. Like all ghosts, words are liars. I chose loneliness because it was familiar and safe.

Even cowards find themselves facing the truth eventually. They just do it too late.

#### *Picture 9—Fog:*

It was my duty to ensure that the Dance of the Arcana proceeded normally. All the morale-building exercises of the day would be wasted if we didn't dance. Everyone on the team had danced each night since his or her initiation; to skip the ritual now would completely unhinge them. It was bad enough that we had to dance without a full Arcana. MolanDif kept asking, "Can we do this with only twenty-one houses? Isn't it against the rules?"

We lit the candles in the dance wheel and set up the mirror-ball at the hub. The drummer drummed, the harpist played, the masks inhabited us (except for MolanDif). ToPu took his pictures, earnestly trying to keep the others safe . . . I have his memory of that. I do not have his memories of Lilijel if he saw her that night. Sometimes I wonder if she pranced the same as ever, or if Chiala's feelings about my rejection infected her. Was she struck quiet, or moved to fiercer abandonment? The only picture recording that dance is this picture of fog.

I woke but did not awaken; and the fog was inside me. I was BarlDan and I was ToPu, both—brothers who shared the same eyes. The eyes looked out on fog, bright fog lying before me like the softest of beds, glowing golden. It beckoned with a force stronger than any I had felt in the most sacred rites. "Dance," a voice said, and the voice was a billion voices. "Join. Dance."

The fog swirled in serene billows before my eyes. In the distance I heard drums and harps. The voices sang softly, their song achingly sweet. "Dance. Join. Sing together." I felt tranquility in the fog, and peace. Love, uncomplicated love, never fading. "Dance. Now. You can see us. Now. Join. Sing." It would be so easy to surrender. Simply falling into bliss.

ToPu shook his head. I could feel his sad lonely longing, but he knew his duty did not let him join the dance, ever. I felt the same wild yearning to accept, but I too drew back from the fog. I had resisted my love for Chiala—by comparison, this resistance was nothing.

I took a step away from the fog, from the choir that sang within it. Screeching with sudden outrage, the placid wisps of fog twisted in anger and locked into a hard churning wall the color and height of a thunderhead. Tentacles erupted from that wall, meaty pseudopods caged within quill-like bones, glistening wet and yellow, smelling of rotten fruit. They grabbed at me, trying to wrap around my arms and legs, and I pulled away with all my strength, feeling them slide suckingly off my flesh, slimy as eels.

I had almost dragged myself clear when a human hand burst out of the blackening fog-wall and clamped around my wrist. The fingers were long and muscular, clenched like claws. It did not try to pull me into the cloud, but its grip was iron; I could not wrench it loose. Desperately, I grabbed my trapped wrist with my free hand, and with the strength of both arms heaved backward. My captor held on; and as I tugged, the rest of the arm emerged from black fog, and then the head—a head with DiDeel's face but blanched of color, the eyes sewn shut like a corpse's, the mouth screaming wide. Sweat-slick hair plastered the sides of his face, hair of all shades, the hair of the Priestess. Mask-spirit and man had been crushed into one, like two colors of putty squeezed into a formless lump by a clenching fist. For a moment I stared at the ghastly face; then pseudopods wrapped around the head and smothered it back into the fog. The hand around my wrist went limp, fell away . . . and I found myself lying on damp earth, night fog clotting powerlessly around me. My mask lay face up by my side.

In all directions, I heard the same choking crooning DiDeel made before he died. I recognized the tune—the song the fog had sung in my brain. Harmony Team was being absorbed, just as DiDeel had been . . . just as the Mutans must have been, all those quilled pseudopods in the cloud. Some horror was unleashed here long ago, perhaps a grand experiment to unify the spirits of the people; and soul by soul, the horror had devoured the planet. The entire fog bank was a single ghost . . . or rather a billion ghosts trapped in a hellish union that had consumed them all.

Out in the fog, one voice lifted above the rest: tone-deaf Chiala, not yet in tune with the crooning mass. I staggered to my feet and followed the sound, hearing her voice twist angrily as it tried to find the right notes to join the song. She was still off-key, but as I searched I heard her growing closer and closer to the tune the others sang.

When I reached her, MolanDif was already there, cradling her body in his arms. "What's wrong with her?" he cried when he saw me. Without answering, I pulled off her mask and threw it aside. Her face was slack, still deep in trance. I shook her shoulders and slapped her cheek, rousing her enough that she opened her eyes . . . but the eyes were still vacant and the humming in her throat went on.

"Get her to the mirror," I ordered MolanDif, and he was so grateful to be told what to do that he asked no questions. Together we dragged her body to the ball at the hub of the dance wheel and propped her up so she

could see her face. "Your name is Chiala," I shouted in her ear. "Chiala. Chiala. Chiala."

Her eyes focused and saw. She gasped and threw her arms outward to steady herself against the sphere. The fog condensed where her hands touched the mirror, making misty silhouettes like ghosts. She blinked and looked wonderingly at her beautiful face.

Her humming stopped. "Chiala," she said.

*Picture 10—A bend in the Chastened River:*

It is the afternoon of the next day. There is no fog here. The land is a sunny meadow, buttery with summer wildflowers. The river's edge is stockaded by rushes. Chiala, MolanDif and I have paddled the dinghy for many hours downstream. We emerged from the fog bank around midday, but kept going until we were well clear.

The rest of Harmony Team is dead. I tried to save others, but it was too late. Before they died, a few possessed team members smashed our communication equipment. We are now truly on our own.

We carry maps and aerial photographs that indicate it is a four-day trip to the sea. A few rapids might force portages along the way, but the journey will not be difficult. From the mouth of the river, another two days up the coast will take us to one of the planned sites of colonization, and there we should find a cache that contains working communicators.

In the picture, MolanDif and Chiala cook supper over a campfire. They believe I am still gathering firewood, but I've already collected what we'll need for the night. I have concealed myself in a thicket to take this picture and to watch the two of them hover over the pots.

In this shot, their knees are definitely touching.

*Picture 11—Chiala by the fire:*

She holds her mask in both hands, frozen in the moment of raising it to her face. Her head is twisted slightly toward the camera; she must have heard something as I focused the lens, and turned to look at me. Behind her, the sky is a sheet of deepening indigo spreading over the dark meadows. A clump of trees stands silhouetted on the horizon.

I took this picture to distract Chiala, to interrupt that moment of donning the mask. The click, the flash.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"You shouldn't tonight," I told her. "The trance opens us too wide. To the fog. Opening yourself to the mask—it's too risky. The fog wasn't strong enough to take us when we were ourselves, not even when we were asleep. Only in trance. Please, Chiala, leave the mask."

She looked at me steadily for several seconds. Half her face was lit with the sun-yellow blaze of the fire, the other half cloaked with shadow. "You have nothing to say to me about taking risks," she said. Very deliberately, she pulled the mask over her face.

"It should be safe," MolanDif said from across the fire. "The fog is a long way behind us." Self-consciously,

glancing sideways at Chiala for her approval, he put on his own mask.

Chiala began drumming on her knees. I watched her strong hands rise and fall.

*Picture 12—A night view looking upstream over the Chastened River:*

Track the image from foreground to background: the dark water flowing over outcrops of black rock; reflections of two of Muta's moons farther upriver, rippled smears of red and silver; the dark fields rising to rolling hills; the night sky gaudy with stars.

Stretching across half the river valley is a churning wall of fog as high as the eye can see. It approaches with the speed of a summer windstorm.

I took this picture while standing alone on the river bank, grass whipping my legs with the force of the oncoming gale. Chiala and MolanDif had fled downstream in the dinghy. Chiala was still half in trance as I helped them push off, MolanDif chanting, "You are Chiala, you are Chiala," with each awkward stroke of his paddle.

They could not travel as fast as the cloud.

I stood between them and the ghosts like a brave man, wrapping myself in an armor of unconvincing hopes. I hoped the mist would not pursue my companions until it had dealt with me; I hoped I could escape it as I escaped before; even if it consumed me, I hoped I could resist long enough for the others to get away.

And I hoped that if they did get away, Chiala would realize the risk I took in the end, when it was too late for anything else.

I set my camera down carefully and picked up my mask. If I was to be bait, I had to make myself tempting. I donned ToPu's face and opened myself to him.

*Picture 13—My face in terror:*

ToPu came immediately. He inhabited my body but my consciousness remained awake, watching everything. Perhaps it was ToPu's choice to keep me with him; perhaps our previous confrontation with the fog had realigned our spirits somehow, allowing us to coexist in the same body. I don't know. I only know that we stood together as the fog descended upon us.

Through ToPu's spirit eyes, I saw past the physical aspect of the fog and into another plane—a plane of ghosts where a great agglomerate creature rippled and shimmered around us. Heads erupted from it and were dragged screaming back inside; pseudopods and arms writhed out of control, scrabbling at the ground, never gaining purchase. From deep within the creature came a ceaseless frenzy of moaning, surging in pulses like ocean waves.

ToPu picked up the camera and began shooting picture after picture of the swallowed souls. Tears ran down his face. It was all he could do for them—watch and let them know that he watched.

The fog seethed; the thing that was the fog convulsed around us. Something grabbed ToPu's arm, then his leg,

then wrapped around his head. With one great heave, he was ripped away from me, as if my own body was torn in two. The fog clutched both of us in its grip, and for a single moment in our lives, ToPu and I saw each other face to face. He was not just a mask now but a complete spirit, a wrinkled man in shabby clothes, held spread-eagled before me. Our eyes met; and in his face I saw what he had never known, that he *was* wise despite all his fear and doubt. Then, with agonizing effort, he yanked himself free of the fog, arms and pseudopods sliding away from him. He raised the camera and clicked this picture of me.

In that instant, my vision of the ghost-world collapsed like a bubble popping, and my eyes returned to the physical plane.

The fog surrounded me, a rolling night fog that blotting out all sight. It seemed too thick to let me breathe. Panic took me and I ran blindly, tripping on uneven ground, picking myself up and running on. Brambles tore at my uniform; my shoulder struck an unseen tree, and I spun away, pain scissoring down my arm, my chest. Suddenly there was nothing under my feet and I was tumbling downward, striking the river with a splash that sent warm water stinging up my nose. I swam a few weak strokes, bumped against a rock, and clung to it, panting. Water flowed gurgling around me, while overhead the ghost fog roared.

#### *Picture 14—ToPu:*

It took me three days to find the camera in the mists. It was scratched but undamaged. Nearby I found the remains of ToPu.

The picture shows the mask lodged on a bramble bush. Branches of bramble protrude through the eyeholes and the mouth. The papier-mâché of the face has been dented and ripped in numerous places. The garnet and its setting are gone.

Scattered on the ground around ToPu's bush are the other masks—the rest of the full Arcana, Liljel and MolanDif's masks among them. Their eyeholes all stare at ToPu, like an audience gathered to hear a speaker. Their gems are missing, but the masks are otherwise undamaged.

They must have been carried here by the fog cloud, then released. I like to believe that the mask-spirits and their human hosts were released too. Perhaps they proved incompatible with the Mutan ghosts and could not truly meld with the whole; but I prefer to think that ToPu saved them. Within the cloud, he located each familiar soul, watched it, took its picture, freed it by making it real.

That is what I tell myself. That is my mythology.

The gems are gone, and the mask-spirits departed. Liljel will not dance on this physical plane again.

I dream that Chiala and MolanDif survived. Though I searched the length of the river, I did not find their bodies or the dinghy. The fog stayed thick about me, angry that my soul was closed to it forever; but despite the fog, I think I would have found Chiala's body if it were there.

#### *Picture 15—The sundial:*

I took this picture earlier today. I won't tag it for preservation like the others. It's better to go to the park and see the sundial for myself. I am a man who should remind himself of the realness of things.

I came back to this city because the huts are here and all our supplies. The fog followed me back . . . or perhaps it never left. I think it will stay with me wherever I go.

The task force has surely left orbit and gone to a new planet by now. The universe is too rich in worlds for them to trouble with Muta. No colony would be safe here, unless they abandoned their masks and the dance. That is a price they will not pay.

The ghost fog swirls around me but its attempts to consume me are futile. My link to the spirit world is gone. If I want to commune with ghosts, all I can do is talk.

Are you listening to me, fog?

I've hated you for a long time, hated you for the murders and my banishment here. But the loss that hurt me most was none of your doing. And the souls trapped inside you . . . I can't help thinking of them as people like me, though I know Mutans are alien, nonhuman. Maybe to them, being part of this undifferentiated mass is heaven; but I can't help thinking it's hell.

I've decided to do something, fog. I've done *nothing* so often in my life, there aren't many options left open to me. But I can still watch. I can still try to see, really see, the souls you've swallowed. They may nearly have forgotten the people they once were, but I think they can remember. If they try. If I try.

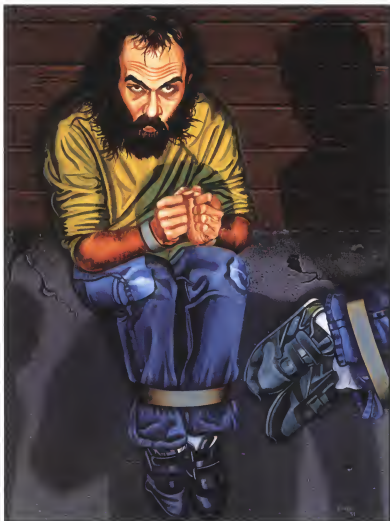
I'm watching. It know it's not much, but it's something. I'm watching.

#### *Picture 16—Fog.*

#### *Picture 17—Fog.*

#### *Picture 18—Fog. ♦*

# Time and Again



## Dan Perez

Angus McKeeffe grinned. It had been one smooth heist. Jimmy Peters, who sat beside him in the hijacked Brinks truck, whistled merrily. McKeeffe steered the truck into an alley between two warehouses.

"Almost home free," he said. "Man, I ain't never been rich before," said Jimmy. He shrugged his skinny shoulders. "I dunno what I'm gonna do."

"Buy yourself an island in the Caribbean. That way I can come visit you in my new yacht."

Jimmy giggled and slapped McKeeffe on the shoulder.

They pulled up behind a ramshackle warehouse, and McKeeffe let Jimmy out by a corrugated metal door. Jimmy opened it and directed McKeeffe as he backed the truck in. After the door clanged shut, McKeeffe tapped the horn, a signal to the two men in the back of the truck that it was safe to come out. Another truck, with the logo "Golden-Bake Bread" on its side, was parked nearby.

The four of them gathered behind the truck, gazing at the gleaming cargo stacked inside.

"Oh, you ever seen anything so pretty?"

"Man oh man, it's gorgeous. I'm going to keep me a bar."

"No way. You know it's all gotta be melted down."

"Let's get it into the bread truck and get out of here."

Illustration by Steven Gould

"You sure it'll hold the weight? That's a lotta gold."

McKeefe sighed in exasperation. "We paid them auto-shop guys a lot to reinforce the frame and—"

A marble-sized silver sphere arced through the air and struck the concrete floor at their feet, followed instantly by a flash of light and a pop like that of a flashcube. They found themselves enveloped in a thin, bitter-smelling vapor. As McKeefe reached for his holster .38, he fell to his knees and then collapsed.

When he came to, McKeefe saw that he and his men had been moved over to a spot near the wall of the warehouse. He tried to move, but his hands and legs were bound with what looked and felt like thin strips of paper. Whatever it was, it held fast against his struggling. His men, who still slumped unconscious, were similarly bound. He had just managed to wriggle into a sitting posture when he heard the voice.

"Oh, you're awake."

McKeefe looked up to see a tall man with a prominent nose and jutting chin. He wore black coveralls with no buttons, pockets or zippers. A cord hung around his neck, and from it dangled a transparent tube containing more of the silver spheres. He smiled. *That's a bad sign*, McKeefe thought. The stranger spoke again. "Are you Angus McKeefe?"

McKeefe thought of his grandpappy. He had been one worthless sonofabitch, but he'd taught McKeefe one useful thing: Always answer a question with a question. Helps you get the upper hand. "Who are you?"

The tall man chuckled. "I'm sorry. My name is William Benke Solomon. Am I correct in assuming you're Angus McKeefe?"

McKeefe looked beyond Solomon and saw four others dressed in the same featureless coveralls moving toward the armored truck—toward the bars of gold bullion stacked in it. "Are you a cop?"

"No more than you and your men are Brinks guards."

"Shit," hissed McKeefe. The one thing worse than cops screwing up a heist was other criminals screwing it up.

"Are you McKeefe?"

"How do you know my name?"

"Well, I know all your names, although it's difficult to match names with faces. There's Angus McKeefe, Wiley Adams, James Peters, and Jesus Hinojosa. Mr. Hinojosa is the hispanic fellow there, I'd guess." He pointed toward Jesus.

McKeefe noted that his men still hadn't come to. As if anticipating his concern, Solomon said, "They'll be fine. Sleepmist affects some more strongly than others."

"How did you find out about our plan?"

Solomon chuckled again. "You won't believe me."

McKeefe was getting fed up. Bad enough that they'd been jumped by these assholes, he thought, but the jerks had to gloat, too. Well, as long as Solomon kept volunteering information, it might pay to keep him talking. He bit his lip and said, "Try me."

Solomon gestured toward his companions. "My associates and I are from the future. From the year twenty sixty-eight, to be exact."

"Oh, bullshit!" McKeefe spat.

The man laughed. "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

Wiley Adams, who lay sprawled next to McKeefe, struggled against the papery strips binding him and said, "What the hell's going on?"

McKeefe nodded toward Solomon. "We're being ripped off."

"Ripped off? These guys aren't cops?"

McKeefe shook his head. Wiley's normally wolfish features went pale, and he struggled madly against the bonds. "Mac, they're gonna kill us!" His voice was high and tinged with panic. "They ain't gonna want no witnesses! We're dead!"

"Shut up, Wiley," McKeefe commanded. Wiley flopped like a dying fish on the concrete floor, screaming as he tried to free himself. Solomon touched the tube that hung around his neck, and a silver sphere dropped into his hand. He bent near the screaming man and pinched the sphere. It emitted a small puff of vapor that enveloped Wiley's head. His eyes rolled up in their sockets and he stopped struggling.

McKeefe shook his head. "God damn."

"He's only asleep, Mr. McKeefe."

"Are you planning to kill us?" McKeefe asked.

Solomon replaced the sphere in its tube. "Of course not. I can assure you that you and your men will survive. We're just here to 'rip off,' as you put it. We'll take the gold and then return to our own time. No killing is necessary."

McKeefe hoped Solomon wasn't lying. Grandpappy had also said never to trust crazy people.

"I can tell by your expression, Mr. McKeefe, that this is all a little hard to comprehend. You can rest assured that, in spite of our taking your gold, you will profit from today's events."

"How?"

"It's a rather involved story. I'll tell you in a moment."

Solomon called out to his henchmen, who loitered over by the trucks.

They walked up, and McKeefe studied them as Solomon issued orders in a low voice. The group consisted of a tall, dark-eyed woman; a thin, balding black man; an oriental who wore a tool belt of some kind around his waist; and an elderly white man wearing a green plastic headband with a small wire antenna over his right ear. They listened attentively while Solomon spoke, and then they laughed as though he had told them some sort of joke. Then the man with the headband turned and went back to the truck. The other three disappeared behind some nearby crates and reappeared pushing a large object that sat on metal rollers.

It was an oblate platform, roughly fifteen feet long and seven feet wide, constructed of a bluish metal, that glinted in the dim light from the fixtures above. Rising up from either end of the platform were two gleaming glass cylinders that contained a network of gold wires as fine as strands of hair. Electricity, or something like it, sparked and flashed at intervals across the gaps between wires. Each cylinder was capped with a small box constructed of the same metal as the platform, and both

boxes had what looked like a security keypad set into them. It was like nothing McKeeffe had ever seen.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Solomon as his cohorts rolled it past.

"What is it?" asked McKeeffe. His anger and frustration had been washed away in a flood of curiosity.

"Seventy-eight years from now, the first bipolar Time Distortion Field Generator—we call it a TeeDec—will be built. The first fully functional time machine."

McKeeffe nodded silently. He felt that this was getting a bit elaborate for some kind of gag or trick, and opted to listen.

Solomon went on. "Like you, I'm a criminal. In your future, and my present, law enforcement has improved, but not to the point that intelligent, careful criminals cannot become quite wealthy. So my friends and I, being intelligent and careful types, became wealthy."

"If you're rich, why are you taking our gold?"

"For the sheer thrill and prestige of it. This is a historic event. The first use of the TeeDec to commit a crime!"

"You said we'd profit from this. Are you going to leave us a share of the gold?"

"I'm afraid not. Actually, I said *you* would profit from today's events. I can't say how your companions will fare. I'd like to show you something." Solomon reached behind his back, and from a hidden pouch in his coveralls brought out a tattered paperback book sealed in a transparent plastic sleeve. He leaned down and handed it to McKeeffe.

Handling it awkwardly because of his bonds, McKeeffe examined it. The title was *Time Heist*. The cover art was a crude painting of Solomon and the platform. He gasped when he saw the author's name on the cover.

"Angus McKeeffe."

"That's correct."

McKeeffe shook his head in disbelief. "I'm no writer." "You'll learn while you're in prison for hijacking the Brinks truck."

"Prison?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. You'll be better for it, though."

Solomon suddenly chuckled.

McKeeffe looked up from the book. "What's funny?"

"So many historical things happening today," the tall man said. "And the ironies! Don't you realize it? You're the first author in history to see a copy of your book in print before you've even written it!"

McKeeffe shook his head. He felt confused. Solomon reached down and plucked the book from him. "I found your book quite by chance. I happened to be browsing through an old bookstore, and I was shocked to see that this paperback had my likeness on the cover. After skimming a few pages, I nearly fainted. Imagine it! A book about time travelers who commit the perfect robbery. We planned and executed the theft of the prototype TeeDec, as your book stated, and we prepared for the cross-time robbery."

"One worry occurred to us. There are dangers to time travel. There is a phenomenon called the 'grandfather paradox,' in which altering the events of the past alters

the events of the future. If you travel into the past and kill your grandfather before he conceives your father, you cannot come to exist. But if you never existed, how could you kill your grandfather?"

McKeeffe frowned.

Solomon chuckled. "Yes, it's confusing. And to complicate things, the binding glue of your book had loosened by the time I found it, and several pages were missing. Our concern was that, not knowing the whole story, we might accidentally violate the paradox. But my associate Chiang pointed out that since the book had been published, we had, in effect, already robbed you in the past, and since our present was sound as far as we could tell, we hadn't violated the paradox. We had only to come here and proceed as we saw fit, taking care not to harm anyone."

"Just to be certain, I looked up newspaper articles from the year mentioned in your book, and they confirmed the robbery, and how the gold disappeared without a trace. The articles scoffed at your stories of time travelers, but you knew better, Mr. McKeeffe. You published the true account after getting out of prison. And, sixty years later, I found your book."

McKeeffe's mind was still reeling. "Is it a good book?"

"I found the writing capable enough, and even though some parts were missing from this copy, the story was exhilarating! After reading it, I felt like I'd traveled in time before I ever set foot on the TeeDec. I was reading about my own future in a book which had been written more than thirty years before I was born!"

"Needless to say, my companions and I located this warehouse, which will still be standing in twenty sixty-eight. We moved the TeeDec here and programmed it to transport us to your time. We arrived here while you were out hijacking the Brinks truck. The rest, if I may hazard a bit of humor, is history."

Willim Benlee Solomon laughed loudly. McKeeffe glanced over toward the trucks, where the others were busily stacking gold bars onto the platform. *There goes my yacht*, McKeeffe thought gloomily. Then he noticed an almost imperceptible shimmering in the shadows near the Brinks truck. A cluster of shadows resolved, and McKeeffe strained to see what they were.

The shadows condensed into figures astride a low platform. Solomon wheeled, saw the intruders, and shouted, "Weapons!"

Before Solomon's cohorts could react, two of the figures held up slim glowing rods. McKeeffe felt a prickling sensation, and his muscles went rigid. He could still breathe and look straight ahead, but that was the limit. Solomon stood frozen with one arm upraised. His companions were likewise immobile.

A tall man stepped off the platform and strode up to Solomon. He wore a close-fitting garment of what looked like spun silver, and strange tools or objects hung from the sash about his waist. From his features, McKeeffe guessed who he might be, but the stranger spoke and removed any doubt.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he said, smiling. "I am Willim Benlee Solomon III." ♦

# Feel Good Stuff

## Chap Reaver

Some doctor guy turn us in for practicing medicine out nary a license and we go inside this big house in town with flags and steps and policemen around and no place to park and explain it to a man behind a big desk up high. He got a nice hammer and wear a black sheet and got a funny name that mean he don't sleep enough all the time.

I get up on this raised up stage thing and put one hand on a Bible book and the other hand way up in the air. Man say, "You swarda tella trudy hole trune nutty buttty tru selp you God?"

I say, "What?"

He take another run at it and we go back and forth like that for a while and the man with the black sheet say, "How old are you, son?"

I say, "Thirteen. Big for my age."

He say, "You certainly are."

"Dad, he say I get cheated on brains so they make up for it with the big part." Point at the Bible book, say, "It something like religion."

"Well, do you know what it means to tell the truth?"

"Uh-huh."

"Will you promise to tell the truth while you're sitting in that chair?"

"Uh-huh."

"Very well. You may sit down."

I sit down and this fellow



Illustration by Cecil Heys

who is not happy at home say, "Would you please tell the court your educational background?"

"I go to L. D. school."

"L. D. school?"

"Uh-huh. I try regular school but it don't take so they send me to dumb school."

"I see."

"Down by the football field."

"Yes."

"On Cherry Street."

"Then I would be safe in assuming that you do not hold any postgraduate degrees."

I say, "What?"

The black man in a nice suit that sit with us at a table stand up, say, "We will concede that Paddy has no specialized training, Yawner."

The unhappy fellow say, "Will you please describe for us your diagnostic procedures, your treatment programs?"

I say, "What?"

"Come, come," he say, mouth all soured up. "You are charged with practicing medicine without a license. More specifically, for professing to heal or cure and accepting remuneration for these services."

I don't know what any of that is. I say, "How come you're so mad at me and all?"

He say, "I am not mad at you, Mr. O'Shay. I am simply trying to elicit the facts so the court can determine your guilt or innocence. Just try to answer the question."

I feel like I am going to start having nerves or something. The man with the sheet and hammer say, "Perhaps if you rephrased the question, Mr. Crapps."

I laugh at that name pretty hard. The mad guy, Mr. Crapps is really his name, say, "What do you find so amusing, boy?"

Now all the time one of my bad things is laugh when I'm not suppose to, like at church or something. I try to hold it in it get worse and it bust out and I slump way down in that truth chair on my neck.

Boy, what a name, Crapps.

About the time I slow down and wipe my eyes somebody out in the studio audience laugh some more and get me all started again and my sides hurt and have to use the bathroom pretty soon.

The black man who is court pointed ask the man with the sheet if we can take a recess and the man whack the table with his wood hammer real hard. I look around and the hammer man has his head way down laughing too and bite his lip and face all red.

Me and Dad go pee in them wall things, wash our hands and Mr. Crapps come in and go in one of the closets, close the door. Dad say, "Living up to his name," and get me going again. My dad say real funny stuff.

Back in the big room with me in that truth chair again and Mr. Crapps try his best but don't do so good so he say, "Mr. O'Shay, do you have any idea why you're here?"

I say, "It don't make much sense to me, so far."

"Would you please tell the court just why you think you have been summoned here?"

"Well, I think it is 'cause Chirp help kids that don't

talk and some doctor get mad or something 'cause he can't do it so good his own self."

Mr. Crapps look at the hammer man and say, "Chirp is a bird, Yawner. A common robin."

I say, "No she not. She not common."

"She is, in fact, a robin. Am I correct?"

"Just don't you call her common no more."

"All right."

"And I'm sorry I laugh about your name."

"Very well."

"You can't help it, what your name is."

Somebody in the studio audience having trouble like I do and laugh pretty hard.

"Mr. O'Shay, will you please describe to the court what it is that you and this bird do for your clients?"

"You mean the kids that don't talk?"

"Yes."

"Well, Chirp does that. She sit on their shoulder first off and get a feel for them then sort of let them know everything okay here and okay if they talk and nothing bad happen and if they don't want to talk that okay too."

"That okay too?"

"Uh-huh. Chirp like them fine either way. Me too."

"And you claim that these children are cured after this treatment and go on to live healthy normal lives."

"Objection, Yawner." Court pointed man stand up.

"He's leading the witness."

Yawner say, "Perhaps, but I believe this witness can deal with the questioning." He look at me and say, "Please respond to the question."

By now I forget what we talk about.

Mr. Crapps say, "Mr. O'Shay?"

"What?"

"The children that you and your bird administer to. Are they cured afterwards?"

"Oh, no. Some of them better. Sometime a kid start right there, make noise with their mouth and try to make words. Sometime it don't happen all day. Sometime it happen two or three kids. I wish it happen more, every time."

"And some get no better at all, is that correct?"

"Well, they all better some, Mr. Crapps. I mean, Chirp just make them feel better, be around her. They don't go to talking or nothing they have a good time anyway and they like Chirp and she like them and they go to smiling and not so scarish."

"Not so scarish?"

"Uh-huh. Wouldn't hurt you none, spend a little time with Chirp, Mr. Crapps."

Some people in studio audience laugh at that.

Crapps mad again now, mouth pinched up real small. "I assure you that I have no interest in spending my time with a bird."

"I just thought, you know—"

"Please answer yes or no. Do you or do you not claim to cure these children?"

"Well, I don't know. The kids, they with Chirp and—"

"Yes or no, please."

I think it over the best I can which isn't very good but is all I got.

"The court is awaiting your reply, young man."

"I can't do it with just yes or no."

"Do you refuse to answer?"

"Uh-huh."

Crapps get real close put his face near my face, say, "May I remind you that you are under oath and that you are very close to being held in contempt?"

Somebody in studio audience holler, "Let the kid alone," and some other people make "Booo" noises like at wrestling matches.

I point to Yawner and say, "I tell this nice man here that I tell the truth while I sit in this chair and there no truth in yes or no, neither one. You oughta know that."

Some people cheer and clap hands.

Yawner bang his hammer down, say, "Will you approach the bench please, Mr. Crapps?" I don't laugh at his name now 'cause I got use to it. Yawner waves his hand for the black man who is with us and they all lean and whisper so I don't hear. I think about macaroni and cheese. Apple pie. Wonder about Chirp.

They nod their heads, whisper some more. Black man and Crapps sit down. Yawner say, "The court has decided to continue this testimony in chambers." Clonk his hammer down.

Books all over the walls. Me and Mom and Dad sit in soft chairs. Crapps and court pointed man sit in hard chairs. Man in corner with adding machine. Yawner behind a desk, say, "I thought perhaps a less formal setting would be more conducive to conducting our business here today." Look at me and say, "Are you comfortable, Mr. O'Shay?"

"Uh-huh."

"Would you tell me about your bird?"

"Okay."

Yawner wait a while, say, "How did you come to acquire your bird?"

I try to think what 'acquire' mean. Mom say, "Tell the judge how you found Chirp."

I say, "She down in the grass one day, under the clothesline."

Yawner say, "Tell me about her. What did she look like?"

"She look pretty bad, Yawner. Real tiny and no feathers, just skinny wing arms, big mouth and skin over eyes don't even open. Dad tell me it can't eat by itself, it will die soon."

Yawner say, "What did you feed it?"

"Well, I chew up some food a long time and it get all mushy and bend over and she open that mouth so big and I cram it down in there, use my tongue point, like this." Show Yawner how I do my tongue. "Dad say, 'It doesn't even have feathers, Paddy. It will get cold without a mama to sleep with and it will die tonight.' Dad, he don't want me liking the bird too much."

Yawner say, "Why not?"

Dad start to talk, Yawner hold up his hand, say, "Let's hear what Paddy has to say." Look at me, say, "Why didn't your dad want you to like the bird too much?"

"So 'cause if it die I don't cry and everything. Some-

time I try to do things and get all mad 'cause I'm dumb about it. Dad say I can't help it and shouldn't try so hard."

Yawner stand up, walk around, sit on desk corner part. "But Chirp didn't die. How did you manage to keep it warm?"

I say, "I just carry her around all day and sit up stay awake in a chair at night and keep her warm in my hands and let her have some of my strength 'cause I got a whole lot and it soak right in. Talk to her most of the time. Tell her she okay and I won't let nothing hurt her. Chew up more food for her and she grow bigger and eyes get open and feathers come to stay warm by her own self. I do that about a week and I go to bed and sleep a long time. Wake up and pee a long time too."

Yawner smile at the pee part. "Tell me some more."

"Well, next Chirp go to school with me and all the other dumb kids like her a whole lot. She like them too but me the best. Ole Crazy Howard, he get down in the ground out by the slide, scratch around in the dirt and he find a worm, then bend down and pull it out with his teeth. Take his head back and worm still wiggle from out his lips. Girls all scream, put hands on eyes. Then Howard suck him down like a noodle. Chirp watch that and learn fast how Howard is liking it now and they have a hard time to break him from it."

Yawner laugh at that. Court pointed man laugh too. Crapps don't laugh every time. Man in corner add up stuff. Yawner say, "Just keep talking, Paddy. Tell me all about Chirp. Take your time."

I say, "Well, here come the good part, Yawner. One day what Chirp does is kind of hit me with all this stuff in the back of my neck where my head join up. It's like, What a beautiful day! and Isn't it great to be alive? and I sure do love you, all at once. That stuff spread from that place and I get this glow feeling and my whole body just shine on out."

"So I hit Chirp back with some of that feel good stuff of my own and she shiver and sock it back to me again. We do it back and forth and it build up and so good I can hardly stand it. Make me cry and everything, real happy everywhere. Just me and Chirp."

Yawner say, "Himm," scratch his neck.

I say, "One day me and Chirp out back and this boy robin come strut around and do look-at-me stuff. Chirp do see-how-cute-I-am stuff at him and they play some game, jump in the air and flap against each other."

"He is up to something, Yawner, and I want to tell him be nice to her. Before I tell him they fly off together, set up house or something. Dad say, 'She will stay gone now, Paddy.'"

"And I say, 'No she don't.'"

"Chirp gone and I miss her all the time. Then one day there she is, Yawner! She got two babies with her, they hardly got any tails at all and they learn to fly and Chirp, she got her chest way stuck out all proud. We do feel good stuff for a while, glad to see her and she glad to see me and we together again like it suppose to."

Yawner say, "How did you know Chirp could help autistic children, children who do not speak?"

"That start at school," I say. "Most kids in school they

worse than me. They real sweet and nice on the inside but on the outside they drooling and jerking and jabbering and can't help it. One kid don't say nothing every time, Bruce. Bruce like us and follow us around. He know what I say but never say something back, just grin. I say, 'Bruce, how about you say something one time?' and Bruce just smile and go right on.

"So me and Chirp, I tell her Bruce can talk if he try and things are nicer. She say, 'Chirp,' about that. She go over on Bruce's shoulder and chirp in his ear. Then she fly back to me and I get a bad feeling inside, real scary. I think this the way Bruce be, scared, like awful bad stuff is coming if he talk any.

"Then Chirp go up in the maple tree and chirp at Bruce with her wings spread out, fuss at him, like Mom fuss at me sometimes, put hands on her hip sides. Next thing you know Bruce try to say something, sound like 'Aagna' and 'Wan.'

"And that the start of it, Yawner."

Yawner say, "When people bring their children to your house to see you and Chirp, do you charge them?" I say "Uh-huh."

Dad say, "It's all donations, Yawner. We don't actually charge them or nothing. I've been out of work and, you know, with Paddy's condition and everything."

Yawner look at Crapps, nod his head. We all go back into the big room again and Dad sit in the truth chair and talk back and forth with Crapps and do a lot better than me.

Real warm and I lay my head down. Next thing, Mom shake my shoulder and we all stand up and Yawner say we are guilty and must pay a dollar and not help kids no more. It don't make sense to me.

The next day is more people than ever. Mom fix lemonade and with the ladies and Dad with the dads and Chirp with the kids and me with the kids wait to be next. Kids don't talk and with real sad eyes until they see Chirp.

Newspaper man come, take pictures of Chirp and me. Chirp take good pictures 'cause she so pretty and cute.

It is lunch time and Mom bring me two big chicken liver sandwiches with a lot of onions and mayonnaise. I sit down and Chirp with me. She like chicken liver like I do. Somebody say, "So this is Chirp." I look up and see Yawner. He look small out from his sheet.

I say, "Another dollar, huh?"

He say, "No," laugh pretty good. "Can I meet Chirp?"

"Sure, Yawner. Feed her some of this here."

He take off a little dab of meat and hand it to Chirp and she take it and say, "Chirp," which is the way Chirp always say, "Thank you," real polite and nice. He stick his finger out by Chirp's chest and she get on and he lift her up by his face and get a kiss on his cheek.

I say, "Hey! She like you right off, Yawner." I don't tell Yawner, but Chirp like everybody right off.

He say, "I like her, too," and sit Chirp back on my knee. "There's a little boy about eight years old talking with his mother for the first time."

"The boy with white hair?"

"Yes. I watched it all. Quite an experience."

"Cute little kid, huh, Yawner?"

"Yes he is, Paddy."

I hold some chicken liver out to Chirp and she make a little sneeze which mean, "I've had enough, thank you." She has a speck of mayonnaise on her chin and I wipe it off.

Yawner say, "I think I know how you can continue doing this without legal difficulties. I'd like to talk to you and your parents about it."

I say, "I don't sit in that truth chair no more, do I?"

"No," Yawner say, give a little laugh again. "Is there someplace we could talk? Perhaps in your house?"

"Me and Chirp got to get back. Kids waiting."

Yawner say, "You certainly know your priorities."

I say, "What?"

"Paddy, do you trust me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then let me take care of everything."

I say, "Okay," and Chirp fly over on his shoulder and give him a nice "Chirp," kiss his ear. Yawner got hangy down ear lobes.

Yawner shake his head, say, "Wow."

Me and Chirp get back to work and stay real busy and Yawner help with the lemonade and Chirp has two more kids try to talk before we all done. One of Chirp's best days ever.

Some moms and dads stick around and help us clean up the yard, pick up paper plates and cups. The kid with white hair sit on Yawner's knee and talk some words with him and Yawner has big old tears slide down. People real nice sometime.

Even Ole Crapps. He come in his car and meet Chirp and some moms and dads and kids and talk to me real nice and smile and his nerves not so fast like before. We all go in our house and around the kitchen table. There is potato salad and hamburger but nobody eat but me.

Yawner, Crapps and Dad talk and write on yellow paper and Mom listen and I eat. All done and they still talk so I go outside and breathe way in through my nose. Nice night and flowers somewhere. Bob White say his name.

Say it again.

Frog down in the swamps go, "Harrump," and I say, "Harrump," back. I can do just like a frog. I do it a lot more times and get more frogs harrumping back and forth trying to figure it out. Wonder who I am and why I am not down in the swamp like everybody else. I tease them a few more times and stop.

I sit on the swing bench. Half a moon over there in back of Buck's. Wonder can Chirp see it? Wonder what she think that thing is?

Yawner and Crapps come out. Mom and Dad stand inside the screen, say, "Good night," and stuff. Holler for me come in soon.

I say, "Okay."

Crapps get in his car and Yawner bend down and talk in the window. Crapps turn on his lights and go on to the street and Yawner come over and sit. Swing and don't say anything for a while. Frogs still talk about it.

Pretty good guy to swing with. He say, "Paddy, I am now your legal representative."

"What?"

"I am your lawyer, you and your parents. They have given me power of attorney so that I may act in your behalf in legal matters."

"Oh."

"Does that please you?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you said 'cause I'm dumb."

Yawner bite off the end of a cigar, say, "Ptt." He get it to burn on the end, say, "Paddy, remember when you told Mr. Crapps not to call Chirp common?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why did you do that?"

"Well, 'cause Chirp sweet and good and everything."

Yawner nod his head. "I liked the way you stood up for Chirp. I admire people who stand by their friends the way you did and do not allow others to say derog . . . to say bad things about them."

Bob White still like his name every time.

Yawner say, "I consider you a friend, Paddy. If someone said something bad about you, I would tell them to stop it."

"Would?"

"Yes, I would. In fact, I'm going to start right now."

I look around, say, "Who?"

"You," Yawner say. "You have called yourself dumb several times, and I'd like you to stop that."

"Why?"

"Because you are a friend of mine and I don't like people to say unkind things about my friends. It hurts my feelings and makes me angry. And besides, it is not true. Please, do not say that any more."

"Don't say I'm dumb?"

"Yes, don't ever say it again."

I try to sort that out but can not get a place to start. I say, "You mean like don't say, 'Nigger' or 'Fatso'?"

"Something like that, yes."

I work on that a while. "Well, suppose somebody ask me why I don't go to regular school. What do I say? I can't say . . . you know, that word start with a D."

"Just say that you are not smart in that way. Tell them that you are smart in other ways. Very, very smart."

"Me?"

"Yes indeed, Paddy. You are very smart."

"No kidding?"

"You are one of the smartest people I know."

"Aw, come on, Yawner."

"It's the truth."

"Smart, huh?"

"Very smart."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I know about such things. I am never wrong. You are definitely smart."

"Well Dad, he say I'm dumb. He say I just come that way and can't help it or nothing."

"Your father is wrong."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. He was wrong when he said Chirp would die, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, he was wrong when he said you were dumb. Dads are wrong sometimes, Paddy. They don't mean to be, but they are."

His cigar smell really bad. He make some rings with the smoke but the breeze, they don't last long. Yawner say, "Before I go I would like to hear you say it."

"Say what?"

"Say you're smart."

"What for?"

"Just say it. Try it. Say, 'I'm smart.'"

I ease it out for him, quiet like. "I'm smart."

"Say it again, Paddy."

"I'm smart."

Yawner say, "Louder."

"I'm smart."

"Now once more, as loud as you can."

I suck up some air, holler, "I'M SMART," and that get Buck's dog to barking and that get Joe Maynard's hound to push out his lips, howl up in the air. More dogs bark all up and down the road and lights are on and folks yell at the dogs and the dogs yell back some more.

Yawner laugh and I laugh too.

Guys come with saws and wood and hammer nails and make this place like at a baseball field where people sit, even if rain is here. They call it a grandstand. Our grass is concrete now for people to park when they bring their kids and see Chirp.

A lot of money every day for lemonade. Yawner say we sell lemonade and not get in trouble from the doctors who get mad at us. It don't make sense to me.

Sign say, "LEMONADE \$5.00" and everyone buy a cup so they can sit in grandstand and see Chirp. Some people come back every day so their kids can have more times with Chirp. More times with Chirp is good.

Bruce work with us now, pour lemonade and clean up. He is a star 'cause he the first one Chirp help and tell everybody about it all the time. Talk too much every time now but I don't say that 'cause Bruce real proud of his own talking self.

When it get cold and no leaves on trees Chirp get all skittery. One day she come in the morning but don't skitter on the kids, just with me all the time and flutter wings and go on.

Then she gone.

She don't come back and Dad give everyone five dollars and they keep lemonade. A sad day and in the morning there no Chirp.

Then this lady come to our house. Yawner send her 'cause she a tooter but I never hear her do it. Her name Miss Doris. She get me to learn my letters and read and do numbers and I do real good 'cause I'm smart. She say that Chirp is migratory. That mean when it cold here she go to a warm place and stay there. That make sense to me.

I say, "Will she come back when it warm some more?"

Miss Doris say, "I hope so."

I hope so too all the time. Miss Doris and I learn a lot of things together and she like me and I like her. A whole lot of hairs start coming out my skin everywhere.

Mom say, "What happened to my little boy?" and cry about it.

It don't make sense to me, cry about some hairs but I cry anyway 'cause Mom cry and she hold me and I hold her back.

Snow come down and nobody in grandstand but me. I like it a whole lot if Chirp come back. I get real quiet and not breathe hardly at all and close my eyes and get a little of that good feeling stuff back of my neck where my head join up. It come from a long way. I send it back and it get there and come back again and I don't miss Chirp so hard.

Yawner come to my house on Sunday. Sunday Miss Doris stay home. His name is Edward C. Turner now but he like it I still call him Yawner and I call him that. He got a job called judge and it make him sad sometime.

I say, "Why don't you do some other job, Yawner?"

He say, "What kind of job, Paddy?"

"I don't know. Chirp come back soon and you can help out. Dad say maybe we do hotdogs. You could be hotdog man with us."

Yawner do a little smile at that. He say, "Paddy, what if she doesn't come back? Have you thought about that?"

I tell Yawner about the good feeling stuff Chirp and I send back and forth long distance. I don't tell anybody else, even Mom. Yawner I can tell stuff. Like Chirp.

He say, "You are very smart, Paddy."

One day I sleep and wake up and do not know why until here come that good feeling stuff not so far away now and I get out of bed. Real quiet in the house and outside too. Sit in grandstand and eat a banana.

Sun come up behind the trees. I think, here she come.

Milk man truck go by. Paper boy throw the paper in the yard. Here come Chirp.

Buck drink coffee, get in his car, go to work at the plant. Chirp come soon.

Sweet little "chirp" in the air, then I see her. Zoom, swoop under the oak tree, straight in, on my shoulder and chirps and kisses and miss me so bad and flutter her wings and I giggle and get tears and snot all run down. The best day there ever was.

My dad call people on phone and they bring their kids next day. We get to doing our jobs and no lemons and don't do the five dollar part and just have a good time.

We have a good time all the time now. Chirp take time off, have her baby birds. Two cute ones, like before. She bring them around so I can see, I tell Chirp their real fine babies and so pretty and cute. Stick her chest out about it.

All summer we all busy and all happy and it get cold and Chirp stay here and don't migratory. She help kids with other stuff besides don't talk. Chirp smart.

Next year after time off for babies Chirp fixing kids fast as she can one day. She stop, sit on my shoulder and give me a new feeling that place, back of my neck.

I say, "What?" and she give it to me again. It come out from that place and go, "Thump," under that bone, middle of my chest. I don't know what to do and look

around some and see this girl sit in the grandstand, yellow dress, dark hair and pretty. She smile at me and I get thump again and smile back. I think she get thump too. We smile and thump some more.

Chirp say, "Chirp," and go back with the kids. I go sit next to the thump girl in the grandstand and she is like Yawner and Chirp but different. Her name is Carol and she is here with her little brother who don't talk.

Carol real shy and me too but we like it, me next to her, her next to me. My face real warm. After while I have to help some more kids and I shake her hand. Small and soft and cool. Get a big thump like a parade go by, hit that big drum.

Carol go home and we write letters. She live at a far place called New York. Her letters smell like flowers and have good feeling stuff. She is nobody's girl, just me. I am that way too for Carol.

One day I tell Yawner about Carol, how I get thump.

Yawner say, "It must be love."

It don't make sense to me but there it is.

Chirp give me five years. She looks about the same but with some white feathers on her cheeks where used to be all black.

Nest in the woods back of Joe Maynard's this year and every night after we all done with the kids she sit with me in grandstand until time she go home, almost dark.

Slow easy rain and Chirp always like it best in the rain. She on my shoulder and her cheek against my cheek a long time, just touch there and up and down real slow. So nice and so sad.

More feeling in that place in back of my neck where my head join up than ever. I send it back. She like it too.

Almost dark and time for her to go. Chirp don't go and it get all the way dark. I lean back and Chirp come down in my lap, real slow and staggered, like she tired.

I hold her in my big old hands like I did when she was all little and tiny with no feathers and pink skin. She snuggle down in there, just the right size. Get real still for a long time. Raise her head one more time, say, "Chirp." Lay her head on my thumb knuckle.

I say, "Bye, Chirp."

Sweet way to die.

Real dark and empty. Frogs stop harrumping. Bob White don't say his name. Way off a train sound how I feel. Everything real hollow. Sit real still, hold Chirp. Cry real bad from everywhere a long time.

After a while I get some of that feeling in the back of my neck. From a long way off and close by at the same time. I send some back and it spreads all out everywhere.

Dad comes outside and sees Chirp in my hands. Sits down and puts his arm on me.

After while Mom comes to screen, say, "What are you two doing?"

Dad say, "Chirp is gone, Mother."

I say, "You're wrong, Dad."

Mom sits with us and cries, holds me real nice.

Dad say, "It seems bad now, Paddy, but before long you'll forget all about her."

Dad is wrong again. ♦

# Captain Theodule and the Chileland Kommandos

Phillip C. Jennings

The *Grofers IV* reached windswept Nanate one Sunday morning in October 1943. She rounded Rana Kao, chasing her smoke beneath an infinite blue sky.

Anticipating by half an hour, Captain Theodule scribbled "Arrival 0940 hours" into his log. Meanwhile, Old Wu sorted among the pennants in the box behind the wheel. Radio had reached this part of the world, but not long ago. A proper use of flag-code still distinguished lawful craft from Thai pirates. This, at least, was the opinion of idiots like Governor Carponi and his muttonchopped staff.

But flags were a useful redundancy, because Sardinians usually botched maritime English, even when they used their equipment properly. "Scuse me,



illustration by Les Donchick

over?" some under-officer of customs greeted Theodule in a burst at high volume. "You not the Ligorno, then? What your speed in knots? What your top speed is; I'm asking, okay?"

"Current rate six knots, top speed fifteen. I'm requesting a launch to bring fresh water. I've also got mail, potted meats, et cetera. The usual traffic." Captain Theodule spoke in a ho-hum voice. He didn't expect much of an island whose natives foolishly cut down all their trees a dozen generations ago, with no recourse afterward but to huddle in cold caves.

There were, of course, the carvings; a home-grown script. And giant heads, toppled and overgrown. The few hundred Polynesians who survived their own folly and the white man's diseases were willing to part with any and all cultural artifacts, but those artifacts were simply too bulky to make good cargo. In any case, the *Gropers* was heading away from civilization, not toward it.

The customs man pounced on Theodule's words. He spoke excitedly to someone else (his thumb still on "Transmit"), and then said, "You come in. We got some big deal for you." This was followed by another burst of highly emoted gibberish, then silence. Sudden and profound.

Theodule and Old Wu exchanged puzzled glances. Life in the Orient Ocean involved profits, risks and frustration. The bureaucrats who ran this port could get awfully officious. Nanate was *their* way-station, set up by the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia for Italian colonists en route to new homes, ten thousand miles to the east. Foreign families carried by foreign ships like the *Gropers* might foster rival plantations—such fears inhibited welcome. This attempt to seduce Theodule's interest was very unusual.

Time passed. After dropping anchor, the crew messed about the cargo hold while the *Gropers'* thirty Boer passengers gathered at the rail. They gazed longingly at the distant green height, bearded men in farmers' braces, women in bonnets, all Bibled up for a long day of hymn-singing. While Old Wu saw to the work, Theodule shaved, then pomaded his hair, a man of opera-singer's girth who required a uniform of his own embellishment, plus tonsorial aids, not to look like a sloven. He stepped out the open bulkhead into this latitude's temperate spring weather. The Port Nanate launch curled alongside the steamer, like a lamprey fixing on to suck blood from a shark. From his height Captain Theodule saw the launch-pilot wave and point, hopping in emphasis, his demands clear though inaudible.

Very well. The captain tossed a salute to Old Wu—a gesture that said *You take over here*. He climbed down to the rear deck. The crane swung; he rode the cargo net into the lesser boat. After these exertions he fussed with his beribboned jacket to restore his dignity—at least he represented one of the victorious allies in the recent Great War, Greece spending much blood to liberate Ionia. When the pilot shouted, "You'll be carrying new passengers soon enough," thoughts of that triumph impelled him to answer, though he knew it was more captainlike to keep silent:

"Germans. From all the old Prussian enclaves. Certainly from Tsingtau."

"And Peru," the pilot spoke over the launch's growling engine. "Hundreds driven south by the Incas. Best to ship them east to the new continents. Chileland won't suit, and anyhow the Araucans are in revolt. They hate the Krauts."

Theodule nodded as the launch crew rolled fresh water-barrels into the net, emptied now of cases of "et cetera"—wine and rum. Prices for tippie remained high in these unsettled east longitudes. Getting the redskin empires to rebel against their German masters helped make the Great War world-encompassing, but the result was a conflict so wide that though the Armistice was signed in Europe, battles still raged. Whites fought Bolsheviks in Russia. Axis Mexico took on the French Foreign Legion. The Athabaskan Confederacy was in arms against the north coast trading posts; White Russian and Nipponese.

One long shore walled the Orient Ocean from Alaska to Chileland, peace nowhere along its length. "I suppose Chileland will go to the British or the French, like Cameroon in Africa," Theodule continued. "They won't like an influx. They'll be happy to see all those refugees out of their hair."

The pilot colored. "And why shouldn't Chileland come to us?" he asked. "We have Churchill's promise! We did our bit against the Austrians! The French own enough in Africa and Asia. The English have generous lands. Let them and the Filipinos and the Jews and the Yankees gobble the west beyond the far Pacific, but give us our share of the east."

"If you quell the Araucans."

"Hah!" The pilot thrust out his chest, then pointed. "See that shipwreck? Horrible, horrible! It only stopped smoking yesterday. German sabotage. We can fix the redskins—bring in so many Chinese they won't know what happened! The big problem is getting rid of the Krauts."

Theodule shrugged. He'd already put his foot in it, if it was true Chileland was to be given to the Sardinians. Chileland, terminating at the stormy Straits of Darwin, the narrow gate to the Tethys Ocean, and to new continents in the three-sixty east latitudes; empty vast places scouted only by air.

Well, why not Piedmont-Sardinia? Why not hand Chileland to a safe little power with a decent cuisine? As the launch spun away from the *Gropers*, Theodule considered worse possibilities. Intransigent Germans in revolt, reinforced by the Botsam of Europe and her colonies. People like his own Boer passengers, who'd never cross to Patagonia if the redskins tore up the one rail line, and who must therefore obey any cabal in control of the port city of Stuenzburg.

Back in 1865 the Yankees of the United Transatlantic States far to the west wearied of being colonists, and set up an independent nation. The Afrikaaners tried the same during the Boer Wars. As the launch sped past the foundered shipwreck, Captain Theodule considered a possibility that blossomed into a full *probability*: Chileland would go the same route.

*Look along Port Nanate's embarcadero! A comic-opera reception, a row of bufoons sweating in too-tight suits, just like me!* To hand a former Reich colony to people like these would goad the place into revolt. But why were they there? So many; even Governor Carponi, hobbling from gout, and his never-sober wife, and their grotesquely porcine son! Oh, God, this was something official, wasn't it?

The launch slid close to a wall softened by old netting and dented floats. The pilot waited until they were snugged to, then prodded Theodule's elbow. "It's time."

With a grimace, the captain stepped ashore. Beneath his feet lay dead earth and concrete, strange to walk on. He moved with a seaman's gait, while the pilot danced around, calling out introductions. Signore Carponi, Signora Carponi, Signore Bonami. . . .

Bonami was a gruff and peppery man, important enough to interrupt this proceeding. He brought his top hat to his chest in an attitude of prayer, took a deep breath, and spoke: "Captain, by international law the government of Sardinia herenow—uh, requires?—we get your ship. You get paid excellently, by my note of promise. Only one purpose, to take my mission to the city of Stuvensburg in the colony of Chileland. All these here, what people stand forward, they come with me. You make room. Understand?"

Theodule burned red and clenched his fists. "You want to hijack my ship—"

"No hijack. Our own ship got bomb five days ago to strand us here. We got to get to Stuvensburg. Exactly fine, I know for insurance purpose you protest. I understand. Sardinian government will cover all risks, very generous. We make history, see? Nothing to get in the way of history, or you be inflamed forever. But why dwell on antagonism? We are good passengers, and for all future Stuvensburg is a free port to your good ship! So, because you got no choice, you make the best and cheer up. Agreed?"

Captain Theodule stood boggle-eyed, unwilling to assent. Time ticked on. The flies here seemed drawn to his scented hair. He swatted petulantly and turned to Governor Carponi. "I take it you've arrested the man who bombed that hulk out there? You've got him in jail?"

Carponi spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I fear we've not so narrowed the field. She was cunningly done, and so many peoples have alibis."

Signora Carponi smiled to cover a petite burp. She hunched demurely forward, her old breasts presented on a bodice-shelf like a tray of cocktail appetizers; two loaves of quaking asp. Captain Theodule hated himself for leering, easily baited and now forced to hear the woman's farcical opinions: "We have Bolshies among our natives. Such is their gratitude for our school and hospital. They all lie to make excuses for each other."

"No, ma'am." Theodule shook his head and raised his eyes to her powdered face. "It wasn't a native, and it wasn't one of the resident staff here on Nanate. If someone's blowing up ships where ships were never blown before, it's one of Signore Bonami's traveling crowd. He's asking me to accept that man as a passenger. Noth-

ing can make me take that risk. At the very least, I'm absolutely obliged to interview everyone who comes aboard."

"Do you think this mad anarchisto risk his own neck?" Bonami asked. "We were on that ship since Singapore—nothing! Nothing until we disembarked here. We see for sure he's not a suicide." The man took another breath, shifting foot to foot in a dance of impatience. "No, I forbid! We got no time. Five days lost! I don't know until this week that is important I get quick to Chileland, but now I do. This try to delay me makes it certain!"

Captain Theodule made a grudging bow, hoping to restore an air of formality. "Signore Bonami, you must understand. At sea I am captain. So I tell you, I'll have interviews. I'll ask questions. I'll protect my ship and my crew. You must not hinder me. And everyone must submit to being searched." He glared down the row as if threatening to strip them to the buff—a woman? Why was she here, her hair stylishly chopped like in that *Gigi* talkie-musical? She smiled back, as dark and husky as a marsk. So did several others, trying to appease his suspicions.

Signore Bonami's eyes narrowed, a man in difficulty, wrestling with his thoughts. "You read Italian?"

"No," Theodule exhaled in partial relief, sensing he was about to get his way.

"French is a similar language."

Theodule raised his hands to God. "Can I help what my father did to my name? I am Greek, I am Cypriot, I am Levantine—I only know enough French to sell figs in Marseilles, and that was twenty years ago!"

"Then I agree. Interviews our first day at sea, for the sake of speed. Every bag and box open to you. We are packed and ready. Governor Carponi, *grazie*."

On the launch, Captain Theodule shared his bench with Signore Bonami. As usual when he was upset, his guts roiled—no rum tonight, only that chalky fizz. Madam Wu made for him as if he were an old man surviving on medicine. For this incipient heartburn Bonami was to blame. Theodule turned from his inspection of the redskin woman and growled: "You first. I'll see you up in the wheelhouse, as soon as we get aboard."

Five minutes later, the crane winched them onto the *Gropers'* rear deck to the tune of Dutch Reformed hymns. Crossing himself to stave off infectious Protestantism—like vampires, most whites of Nordic ancestry were repelled by garlic and crucifixes and sacred signs—Theodule tore up the ladder to break the news to Old Wu.

Signore Bonami puffed behind. Struck by a sudden thought, the captain turned. "I take it the *Ligorno* is your gunship. Something to shoot back at Stuvensburg if they don't like you. Why don't you wait for her? At least then when you get to Chileland, you'll have some clout."

Bonami held up his begloved hand, and caught his breath. "Captain, government is many things. Among them, a show. Like in opera, *teatro*, so much playacting. When a show goes on travel, such men like me run ahead, make the arrangements, excite the newspapers.

My eight staff are too little for any else, but see? Things are so early that no one has told Chileland what the Paris Conference has decreed for them. Except now, these five days—five days! Days for some evil to outrun me, and sow rebellion and anger! To do opposite from my work, while I accomplish nothing!”

“Sit, then. Sit on that flag-box and tell me about your eight people. You must have your own suspicions. Some of them might have backgrounds—”

“Yes, yes, because I want translators. Agile linguists.” Bonami sat. “So it is true, Vitelli spend decades in Austria, and Goebbels was a man of the Reich before he work for Signore Mussolini’s great newspaper cartel, and Rospach is the son of a powerful Chilelander magnifico—I hope his connections be useful. All these—”

“What about the woman?” To conceal his interest, Theodule rang for steam, then pulled down a mouth-piece and shouted, “Weigh anchor!”

He turned back. Bonami waved his hand in dismissal. “An Araucan princess, but you see she’s no tattooed. She’s no-time dance through the rites. Her father’s decision, to make it easy for young Chipilhoa to get university in Switzerland, but now he’s dead, and can she return to that world? To make them see reason? Still, is worth a try.”

“That’s number four. Finish the list.” Theodule watched Old Wu hash down Chipilhoa’s name in Chinese characters; since Madam Wu was the *Grofers’* purser, it was easier that way. Two more strokes and the tall Chinaman held his brush poised, surrendering the wheel as Theodule obligingly took over.

Signore Bonami spoke again, ticking off his fingers. “Sinatra. Signore Langemann. Signore Holbrook, soon the port administrator, an Anglo face to keep the English happy. Signore Chernikoff, because soon we get Russians. One side will win and the other must emigrate. The whole world must focus on Chileland in the east, as it focuses on the Colón Canal in the west, and we will be great like Gran Colombia! Remember that, Captain. And how important to keep us friends!”

Captain Theodule’s expression transformed, as if that idea now struck him for the first time. Forcing a diplomatic smile, he waved Bonami to his feet and escorted him outside. “I will remember. Uh, please send me your Germans next,” he said in a treacle-syrup voice. “Langemann and . . .”

“Goebbels and Rospach. Yes, I’ll do that.” Signore Bonami started down the ladder, shocked into brief paralysis by Theodule’s bark as the captain swung and addressed Old Wu in Chinese: “*Have Young Wu impound all the luggage! Quick, before someone hides something!*”

This sped Old Wu down the ladder after Bonami. Theodule was alone when Signore Langemann climbed to the wheelhouse. “Suppose Chileland declares itself independent,” the captain began. “Would they be grateful if I dropped every one of you into the sea? What do you suppose they’d ask of me, to get on their good side?”

Langemann’s eyes widened. He looked side to side, for spies or henchmen. “No, this is no trap,” Theodule

assured him. “I’m utterly sincere. You may know I carry Afrikaans, godly people searching for a new home far from the pestiferous English.” *Clannish people who’ve kept apart this entire voyage, so I don’t even know what their women look like!* Theodule crossed his fingers, and uttered a large lie: “I myself am much in sympathy. Why let Chileland be ruled by fools fifteen thousand miles away?”

“B-b-because. A weak master makes Chileland no danger. Therefore the gate to the east stays open for all to use.”

“But an independent Chileland! It won’t even have the resources of Piedmont-Sardinia! What harm could it do? You know it’s not the threat of Sardinian armies and navies that prevents those people from going their own way! Only the French or the British could land around Stuvensburg in strength. Why should they feel threatened enough to do so?”

Langemann swallowed. “A country speaking German? Astride the Straits of Darwin, and controlling the only railroad? After eight years war with the Reich? Maybe someday, but not in this decade.” He patted his forehead. “May I sit?”

“What do you know of Goebbels? Or Rospach?” Captain Theodule asked while staring over the wheel, giving no clue if sitting was allowed or not.

“Of Rospach, almost nothing. Aristocrats in training do not talk to such as I. Joseph Goebbels is Mussolini’s man. In the twenties and thirties Mussolini pressed for a united Italy. His newspapers served his own political party. Goebbels came for training as a propagandist. He has a talent for persuading people that white is black, and he’s very clever. He was a novelist in Germany, but to hear him, north of the Alps is Philistia, dunderhead imperialists who know nothing of talent. Dunderheads and Jews.”

“Hmm.” Theodule smoothed his hair. “Sit, then. Take some minutes to describe yourself. Oh, what I said earlier? Just a ruse. Politics is a game for landlovers. After a few days from port, cities and continents are only a bad dream. Here we are, latitude two-fifty east, and because of a little blot of land Signore Bonami poisons my peace, a bad dream indeed. Now that coaling stations dot the Tethys, I’m minded to try the three hundreds. Once I weather the Straits of Darwin into a new ocean, whether I have friends in Stuvensburg means nothing to me.”

Turning his head as he finished this speech, the captain caught Langemann’s small, sad smile. “I’d come with you, if I were the young man I used to be,” the German answered. “The old explorers proved one-hundred east is not the same as one-hundred west, and now likewise for three-hundred—you’ve heard of the Yankee, Howard Hughes? Flying across New Eden beyond the Pacific in the tracks of Amelia Earhart? But in so many ways the world acts round. Perhaps it must prove so, a crazy folded globe like the crazy mathematicians describe. Perhaps at five hundred forty degrees? Or seven hundred twenty?”

“No need to go that far. Just east of the Tethys are lands where no man has set foot, white or yellow, black



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or red," Captain Theodule said. "I'll be happy carrying pioneers, and gawking at giant birds and lizards. So you're a would-be adventurer?"

"An adventurer of the mind. I write novels, though less ambitious ones than Goebbels. Hack stories about a Yankee air pilot, hunting dinosaurs in unknown lands for the San Francisco Zoo. A poor man's Howard Hughes, no time for talkie-actresses. Perhaps you've heard of *Montana Brown and the Dragon Queen*? It's been translated into four languages."

"Penny-dreadful fantasy isn't to my taste," Theodule answered.

"You contradict yourself. Imagine a world of fundamental consistency, only three hundred sixty degrees around. A simple ball. On this alternate Earth, Isaac Newton was followed by a multitude of scientists who made discoveries far more quickly than we here, because they *believed in reason*! In simplicity! By this year of 1943 they have everything reduced to a few laws of physics. Because their round-ball world makes sense, they have no spiritualists, no astrologers, no religious zealots such as plague us here. The only dictators are the dictators of the mind, who rule benevolently. Put Captain Theodule on this utterly sane world, and what you guess? He's soon bored out of his wits! *Give me fantasy*, he begs, so I bring him back to his good ship. As for my silly adventures, intelligent dragons and the rest—well, if the world is truly infinite east and west, in time we will meet species besides ourselves, with their own aeroplanes and steamships and cities!"

Theodule shrugged. "Things get more primitive the farther from Europe."

Langemann laughed. "So say Europeans! Captain, I'm wasting your time. I'm no mad bomber. And whoever our foe is, he's out of stuff to make bombs, because for sure we used our five days to inspect all the bags. Even Sardinians have that much brains."

"He may still be dangerous."

"He may be so, but I am not," Langemann shrugged. "I'm a simple journalist, most utterly harmless. I frighten easily, and when I'm afraid, my hands shake too much for mischief. For this reason I made a very bad German, and left the Kaiser's Reich for sunny Tuscany a long time ago, to avoid conscription and muddy trenches."

Theodule studied Langemann. In fact he seemed civilized and inept, a man both wishful and mild. Finally he nodded. "Tell the next one to come up then," he said.

He was surprised a minute later, when Princess Chipilhoa poked up into view. He looked behind her. "I expected Goebbels or Rospach."

"Goebbels is feeding his lunch to the fish, out the port-hole in the dispensary, groaning horribly all the while," she said, stepping over the bulkhead and approaching the wheel. "What a little man he is, not like a German at all. And not very nice."

"Please sit down. Would you like a cordial?" There were very few women in the world to whom Theodule felt no attraction: Madame Wu, and six or eight disfigured elderly nuns. Otherwise he was a slave to the entire sex. Chipilhoa was broad-shouldered and carried

extra weight, but not piled around the hips in the manner of European females. Some people might say she was built like a stevedore. Still, the captain found her interesting.

Mostly, women did not find him interesting in return. He made no appeal to those who loved wit, or a handsome body. He was a man of some power and wealth, but not nearly enough to give off the proper signals. The only women who returned his admiration with a whole heart were those who very much enjoyed . . . well . . . sex. Somehow they knew he was theirs to command. Chipilhoa's eyes shone with that knowledge. From the way the little glass moved from Theodule's fingers, from the way she took it and drank, an arrangement was struck for near-future consummation.

It was not just the captain's imagination. The princess stood and pressed close, reaching to stroke the nape of his neck. Her voice dropped to a purr. "The girls of my people, before their rites—they are virgins. So I must be a virgin. Nothing I do can alter that state. Perhaps someday you'll see me, and my face will be tattooed. Then things will be different. I will be very grave, and will not recognize you."

"Hmmm." Theodule tried to collect himself. "Ahem. How do your people view this business? Sardinians versus a colonial revolt?"

"Oh, we'll want Chileland as handicapped as can be," she answered sweetly, amused by his attempt to keep to business. "The Sardinians, of course. Consider how the Yankees swept over the Transatlantic Celts once they threw off British rule. From Plymouth to San Francisco, they say little is heard but English anymore. So we'll treat Bonami's friends with kindness, as long as they no longer pretend to rule Aruaca like the Germans did."

Theodule put an arm around her waist. "You can't know all this. You aren't equipped to bargain. You've been away a long time."

"We are not mysterious, Captain. We're just a nation that wants to exist, and we've got all the equipment: horses and muskets and a birthright. Take a map and draw a line through Chileland. Give us a new name north of that line. We know better than to press south and threaten Stuvensburg. Our warriors don't have to travel to Europe to know there are too many whites, and your guns are better than ours."

Theodule grinned. "That simplifies things. And Bonami? Does he say what you like to hear?"

"Yes. So I am happy and want to get home, though I have to be tattooed someday after I get there." She shuddered under his arm. "Maybe someone wants to stop me? Someone wants to wreck your ship? But you will prevent him."

"I might do that," Theodule bent and gave Chipilhoa a kiss. "But I can't keep Chileland from revolting. Enjoy these next days, because I don't foresee an easy future."

"And . . . will you help me enjoy them?"

If *Madam Wu's hearburn medicine works*, the captain thought to himself, an urbane leer pasted on his face. "I'm happy to be at your service," he assured her. By a stroke of luck, just now Old Wu climbed up the

wheelhouse. Theodule was conveniently able to escort the princess down the ladder and to the purser's office. He needed that bicarbonate, he was curious about Goebbels and Rospach—he had several reasons to make the trip. It gave him more control of the whole interview process.

Already, Nanate was diminished to a few thrusts on the horizon, dark volcano-tops and wisps of cloud. As he expected, Bonami and some others sat or stood in the narrow room. Young Wu, the ship's cook, mounted guard on heaped luggage while Madam Wu remained at her desk. She was Old Wu's mother, an ageless crone with rich black hair done around an elaborate trellis, with bits that looked like fish-lures dangling everywhere. It always amazed Theodule that her scrawny neck could hold up so much headgear.

Madam Wu was indeed an amazing woman. "Signore Sinatra," she spoke, and the young man came forward. She hashed a note and handed it to him. "Give this to Old Feng at the Altenhaus on 16 Karlottestrasse, and Sardinia can be assured of the support of the White Lotus Society. We must trust each other, yes?"

Captain Theodule interrupted. "So where are my next Germans? Rospach and—"

*Bang. Bang.* Gunshots! Young Wu raised his cleaver and moved to the indicated door. "Locked! Give me room to swing!"

Signore Bonami clutched Theodule's sleeve. "They went in there fifteen minutes past. Goebbels was seasick. Rospach to help him—Please have care, one of them shoots a gun!"

Wu pounded away. After a dozen blows the hacked door swung open. A body sprawled beyond, taking up all the space three people might otherwise crowd into: the steamship's tiny medical dispensary.

"Which one is he?" Captain Theodule shouted.

Young Wu shovelled the corpse over. "Rospach. Dead!" He ran to the open porthole. "A small man could get through. To where? I see nothing but water below."

"Goebbels is our traitor!" Signore Bonami said. "A secret agent for the Reich!"

Captain Theodule ran out of the purser's office and rounded up to the deck. He looked fore and aft. Near the stern fifty feet away, bearded Boers held songbooks straight out and bellowed a Reformation tune. Thirty of them; seventeen males on the ship's list, thirteen females. They stood stiffly in rows, men all on one side. He counted. Seventeen, yes.

Young Wu puffed to his side. Theodule noticed with approval that he carried a gun. "That one. The small fellow with the fuzz all over his face. Wave him over."

The cook did so as others in Bonami's party joined him on the deck: Chipilhoa, Sinatra, and a lean, dark-haired fellow more Irish than English—Holbrook?

The Boer quirked his head as if unable to believe he deserved five strangers' attention. Reluctantly he hobbled forward, and Signore Bonami leaned to whisper urgently: "That's him! Goebbels is a clubfoot. How could he think to disguise that walk?"

Theodule smiled, raised an admonishing finger and

bellowed: "*Klei binkdorp groenen besweer, eh? Hilt zonne eenklapsot?*"

The little Boer paused. "Oh, *nee*. *Nee*. But I half some English."

"Then you've beat me," Theodule said. "I don't know any Afrikaans at all. You've just answered total gibberish. But then I don't suppose you know Afrikaans either, Herr Goebbels."

The little man tugged off his beard. "*Sebr kling*. Only you miss one thing. My kommandos here half guns, and you're outnumbered. So! So we're chust a little faster brought to the point of history, but why not? Fate iss in a hurry to purge so many degenerates." He backed up a couple of steps. "Where iss Langemann? And the old Russian? Zey won't hide for long. Call zem out here."

As he spoke, the Boers rushed their portable pulpit and grabbed their concealed weapons. The men did, anyhow, while the bonneted women hiked their skirts and plucked out gartered pistols. They spread out, port and starboard, whipping off their headgear for the sake of peripheral vision. For the first time Theodule saw their tightly bunned hair and rawboned faces, but they were women. Therefore they were beautiful, however bright with hate or grim with duty.

His heart sank. "Can you all swim?" he asked those who stood with him. His voice sounded odd even to himself, queerly conversational, as if nothing important was at stake. Holbrook and Bonami nodded; Chipilhoa answered, "Yes."

"Signore Bonami! Call for your missing colleagues! Captain, tell zis yellow monkeyboy to drop hiss gun. Get to ze rail!" Goebbels shouted orders even more stridently now that he was flanked by bearded gunmen. He and the captain stood face to face, and somewhere behind his back Theodule heard shots. The steamship heeled into a tight turn, Old Wu's doing. The gun Young Wu dropped went sliding. The captives' progress to the starboard rail was more a lunge than a walk for those who'd not yet gotten their sea legs.

"When you hit water, swim away fast to avoid the screws," Theodule called this advice as he climbed over. Seeing him, Goebbels shrieked "Hey, not you too! Chust ze Sardinian mission! Captain, *du idiot! Was gibts*—"

Young Wu was equally quick to dive. With a sudden grasp of events, Sinatra vaulted the rail, tugging at the redskin princess. Theodule barely glimpsed his fall before he hit water. He sank, spluttered to the surface, and began to flail away from the *Groepers'* flanks.

The ocean was a big place. When he turned back the steamer already looked small, easily half-blotted from sight by the cresting waves. But not yet so small or far away that he was immune to stray bullets.

He shouted anyhow. "Here! Here! Come to me! We must stay together!" The others must be nearby, since so many of Goebbels's kommandos looked and pointed in this direction.

Then he saw Chipilhoa's head. She stroked easily to his side, like a merwoman. "A bullet might be better than this kind of death," she said.

"This is the way to do it. Now they have no hostages.

And if Old Wu was on the alert . . . pray to your gods, if you have any. It's years since my crew has gone through the drill. Years since we had trouble with pirates."

In the distance, Goebbels hurried his people away from the rail, and on to other matters. They ran about like killer ants. The *Gropers* dwindled, now on a straight course, the boilers valving off pressure as her speed diminished to dead slow. Those abandoned here with Captain Theodule had no raft, no flares. Could Old Wu find them again if the ship pulled too far away?

Holbrook and young Sinatra bobbed into view. "We were doomed anyhow," the youth shouted, "but why you? And the Chinese cook?"

"Some of our doors are true bulkheads," Theodule answered back. "If my crew got to just five of them in time, your enemy has no way into the guts of the ship. No way to control where it goes. No way to cut off the radio. Except if they're armed better than Thai pirates usually are, with dynamite and such."

Chipilhoa closed her eyes, as if to exorcise a bad dream. "So the *Gropers* keeps to Nanate. And nothing happens, because the fools there—I'd guess they're too weak; two or three sergeants and customs agents who've forgotten where they keep their bullets. They'll wait for the gunship *Ligorno* to reinforce them."

She paused for breath. Holbrook broke in. "Captain, we're almost still in sight of the island, true? Better we swim than just float here. The *Ligorno* had all the Indian Ocean to cross while we flew to Singapore. It may be another whole week behind us."

Theodule considered his group's morale. Sharks were definitely not to be mentioned. "Swimming will waste our strength, and get us separated. Please just hold on. Those who are fat should tread water easily. Those with muscles likewise."

"What about us bony ones?" Sinatra asked.

"When we get to civilization, I suggest you develop a decent interest in food," the captain answered.

During the next hour conversation dwindled. Swimmers with pale skins, like Holbrook and Bonami, dunked their heads now and again against the afternoon sun. Miserable from sun- and salt-burn, his lips blue, Sinatra complained about the cold water, which in other circumstances might have launched Captain Theodule into a lecture on sub-Antarctic currents and other oceanic phenomena.

Then his ears picked up the throaty sound of the Port Nanate launch. This was followed by a gunshot from the distant becalmed *Gropers*, a useless gesture of defiance. Almost as useless were the hoarse shouts of the people around him, but the launch pilot must have caught sight of a waving arm, because the boat's white prow turned directly toward the little entourage of bobbing heads.

In a few more minutes, six bedraggled wretches were dragged in to stretch forth on the launch deck. "We're taking you in for the doctor," the pilot said. "Old Wu says that's the best. He says they're still holding out, and maybe soon the kommandos will get hungry."

"Hum," Theodule answered. His was a sigh of busi-

nesslike contentment. *Hungry, bub?* Young Wu's kitchen was half al fresco in these latitudes, not bulkheaded away in indoor confinement. All his ingredients were labeled in Chinese. A very few—the most conventional—were also labeled in English.

And in Thai. In years past, it proved a dangerous thing for pirates to be literate in Thai. And if Goebbels and his pirate crew believed that the "sugar" canister contained sugar, so much the worse for them.

But for now, it was time to towel dry, and consider whether, as a poor victim rescued from an awful plight, he could beg some bicarbonate of soda, and a bed to take a nap.

Captain Theodule woke to the smell of musty sheets. The slant of evening sunlight through Governor Carponi's half-shaded windows told him that several hours had passed. Princess Chipilhoa bent down to whisper huskily into his ear, her voice raw from earlier mouthfuls of salt water. "This isn't what you think. I'm to tell you Old Wu has radioed a message. It's time to send the launch out again."

"Thank you." He must have missed a feast. He kissed her, tasting chicken, onions and . . . paprika? And red wine. As he rose, she yipped back in stark panic. Puzzled, Theodule swung up onto his feet and looked around for something to justify the look on her face, but now that look was masked by an embarrassed smile. She held out his clothes. He slipped into freshly laundered pants, grabbed his bemedaled jacket, and led the way out the door. Damn. The color had bled from some of his ribbons; a problem to think about in the future, not these next hours.

Nanate's doctor waited on the boat, boldly wide-legged as if the launch were already bobbing on storm-tossed seas. Behind him, under an awning's shelter, sat the rest of the voyagers, and now Chipilhoa found her seat too.

Theodule didn't have to ask. The implication of all these, er . . . civilians . . . was that the *Gropers'* legal crew were once again masters of the deck. The launch sped out to sea. The sky darkened ahead, while behind them the sun dipped below glorious crimson-gold clouds.

The *Gropers* bore down to intercept them, arrayed with lanterns and lights, and looking incongruously festive. Briefly Captain Theodule wondered if Goebbels stood at the wheel, Old Wu tied up at his side. But instead of ramming the launch, the *Gropers* cut speed, and down came the net to take them aboard.

Down it came, weighed with bodies, emergency cases not quite dead. Theodule helped roll them out for the doctor's attention, but Goebbels was not among them. Up above, the steamer's deck was a mess, gritty with broken glass and slick with vomit. Here lay men and women, pathetic in death, arranged in rows by crewmen under Old Wu's command.

Old Wu touched Theodule's arm. The unexpected gesture startled the captain more than it should have—he was reaching the end of his resources, despite his

few hours' rest. "The survivors are in the purser's office," the Chinaman said, treading back with a careful step to let his captain lead.

Appearing out of nowhere, Signore Langemann found purpose carrying a lantern as they headed for Madam Wu's domain. The German's face was ghastly white despite the warm paraffin glow. Theodule wondered what horrors he'd gone through these last hours, his fears embellished by his lurid imagination. "You hid?" he asked, and the man nodded. Perhaps he'd tell his story later.

At the end of their procession they found Madam Wu enthroned behind her desk, splendid as always in silk, a wizened crone beneath her elaborate burden of hair. The gun she held was huge in her skeletal hands. It seemed a kindness to take it from her. Theodule bowed and turned. Trussed up along the opposite wall sat Goebbels and three others; four picky eaters who thereby escaped death by poison, though their shirts were badly slimed. The knots that bound them had names and uses that went back to sailing-ship times.

"Something might be done with you," Captain Theodule croaked at their leader, wrinkling his nose at the smell. "You plot like a middling fair chess player, a few moves ahead of events. So you probably have connections in Chileland. People who work for you, or people you work for, eh, Herr Goebbels? Or haven't they had time to get there yet?"

Goebbels said nothing, but his eyes shot fire. He didn't look like the sort of man who'd say nothing for long. Theodule tried to needle him. "Killing Rospach . . . his father's what the Yanks call a big cheese. You might have blamed it on Bonami's crowd. You won't be able to do that now. Too bad for your side."

"You'll be surprised what people can be made to believe," Goebbels shot back. "Ze great truths haff nothing to do with little facts, and anyhow Rospach was a weasel. A bourgeois degenerate."

"Captain?" The voice was Langemann's. He spoke softly at first, as soft as a ghost. "Captain, listen to me. I know this man. I know his powers. If I can do one thing tonight, it will change history much the better. You think to take him to Stuvensburg, to jail, hoping to parade his cronies and make him betray them. A useful thing to have him handy, useful even maybe to delay his execution."

Suddenly Langemann raised his voice. "So let me warn you: no! He will play martyr, and give interviews, and write firebrand columns. Soon he will twist every-

thing—everything! And win free, a petty demagogue, into the embrace of a cheering mob. You must not let him reach Chileland at all!"

Theodule pondered this wild vision. Was Langemann altogether well in the head? "Well, I could drop him and these others into the launch. These dangers—they hardly apply to a Nanate jail, do they? No newspapers here, and hardly any people." He sighed wearily and turned back to face Goebbels. "I suppose your Boers shot up my wheelhouse, eh? Broken glass everywhere. And if it rains this week, I just get wet. Hell, I don't owe you any favors, not at all. The sooner I'm rid of you, the better. Signore Langemann, tell the launch to get ready for four prisoners."

That night as the *Gropers* steamed off for Stuvensburg, Captain Theodule spent more time supervising the work of cleaning up than he did sleeping. Breakfast, morning sunshine and ovations of gratitude from Signore Bonami helped to restore him. Later that morning, he encountered Princess Chipilhoa gazing out over the stern, not far from the Boers' abandoned pulpit. "My apologies," he began, thinking back to their last encounter and her quirky behavior. "Last evening it was vulgar of me to jump out of bed with you still in the room."

"Oh no," she laughed. "It was just . . . well . . . all that hair! It looked like some parasitical animal, glued to your chest. The light wasn't that good, you know." She seemed disposed to say more, but she stopped, not knowing how to pick her words.

"I hope you're not prejudiced against hairy men," Theodule said.

Chipilhoa shivered, though the breeze was not cold. "I—I think I could overcome it. With a little practice. It's not good to harbor childish fears."

For a minute the two of them stared off in silence. Theodule thought of dead hairy men, laid out in rows. Men and women. They no longer burdened the *Gropers*, but certainly they must burden the princess's thoughts. She could not have missed seeing them in last night's lamplight.

The enemy. And there'd be more enemies for her and her people: white, hairy enemies. He reached to embrace her. "Come. Come off with me. Land is just a bad dream, and only the seas are real."

"To your room?" she asked.

He leered back. "And to wherever our times take us." ♦

# Stranger Gods

Ralph E. Vaughan

Fra William Gynt lost his faith back there, in the depths of the Cappadocian forest, among the giant trees and abandoned cities. He had been running for a long time. He slowed, stopped and slumped to rest on the twisted length of a fallen limb. He no longer heard the screaming tact-fighters, but the smell of burning flesh stayed with him.

It was always hot on Cappadocia, winter or summer, even among the shade of the trees. He listened to the wind and the furtive sounds surrounding him, a thousand million creatures going through the motions of their small lives. Was all this the handiwork of God? A humanoid God? That was not a safe question for

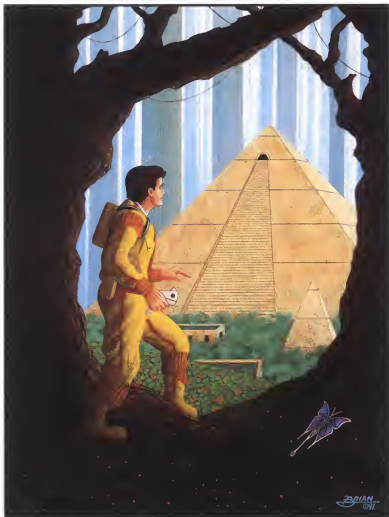


Illustration by David Brian

anyone to ask, much less a priest. Three days earlier he would not have wondered.

Three days ago the confessional had been very damn hot, hotter than anywhere else in the temple. The heat, Fra William decided, was to cook the truth from sinners. And he supposed that the heat had something to do with the fact that only junior priests were required to hear confessions. In the forty-one days since he had shuttled down from the Church-owned New Mecca-bound freighter, he'd been in the confessional seventeen times, twelve hours at a stretch.

People sometimes lined up double deep to receive absolution, but most often they did not. Cappadocia's settlers were farmers, willing or not, and only flocked to Antioch on market days or when ships bound for more important reaches of the Mercantile Union dropped into quick Clarke orbits and shuttled treasures up and down.

The usual sins: *Forgive me, Fra, I felt lust in my heart; Forgive me, Fra, I made statements disloyal to the government; Forgive me, Fra, I secretly called my neighbor a wog.*

The confessional's only source of light and air was a high narrow window. It was late afternoon, and the light hung in the air like a varicolored curtain after passing through the tableau windows of cut native crystal along the Temple's east wall.

Sweating copiously, William remembered how his doomed sister Allyra had warned him against joining the ranks of the Unified Humanoid Church. She had advised him to take a position in one of the Mercantile Union's great trading houses, but she could not prevail against the faith he was sure he had. Nobody had ever talked him out of anything, and in that fashion he was very much like his little sister Allyra.

The door of the adjoining confessional opened, then closed. William slid back the separating panel. Through the metallic mesh he saw the vague form of a woman's bowed head.

"Blessed be the humanoid form," he intoned softly. "Share your troubled heart with me, child."

The woman remained silent.

"I want to help, child," he said.

After a long pause, she said: "I saw something . . . impossible, Fra. I saw a wog perform a miracle."

William's heart leaped at the great heresy. "Perhaps you should start from the beginning."

She told of the farm she and her cohabitant held at the edge of the great forest, how she and he had been assigned each other and the famplot when her grades at the University of Nova Ankara fell and he ran afoul of the law. She told of hours spent alone, told of seeing Cappadocia's wogs, called Canites, passing near their land, seeing their bobbing lanterns as they traveled to the forest's deep heart.

Intelligent and lonely, she was fascinated by the only living creatures she saw on a regular basis. The strangeness of the wogs and the mystery of their lives led her to strange imaginings and stranger dreams.

Two nights earlier she had seen their lanterns and knew she could not stay ensconced in their prefab a

moment longer. Overwhelmed by curiosity, she followed them.

"They were ten in number," she said. "Two carried a vanyan leaf on which rested a dead Canite. They passed close enough for me to see from where I was hiding among the trees. And I was sure it was dead . . . torn to bits by some animal. I thought I saw that clearly by the lantern light. I followed them into the forest, deeper than I have ever gone before. After many hours we came to one of their abandoned cities, a big one. They went to a structure in the center, a pyramid with steps. Out of a building at the summit came another Canite, but this one was . . . different from the others."

"The Canites crowded around the body as the other approached, coming down the steps. Then there was a sound . . . like a word or a phrase . . . I don't know. It's hard to recall exactly now. I felt like it went right through my head. Then the Canites moves away . . . and there was no one on the leaf. The dead Canite was gone. I counted them. There were eleven. The dead Canite was dead no longer. It was a miracle . . . I guess."

There was terror in her papery voice, and William felt a little of it.

"I tried to tell myself it was nothing but an illusion," she continued, "or that the Canite on the vanyan leaf had just been injured, and not that badly, but I cannot believe myself. I ran from that place, running all night blindly through the forest. I got back just before my cohabitant returned from the gaming houses and cuddling pens."

"Did you tell your cohabitant what you had seen?" he asked.

"No. He would not have understood, and he hurts me when he does not understand." She paused. "I wasn't going to tell anyone at all. It has taken me two days to gather the nerve to come to town. I thought a priest . . ."

"You did the right thing," he assured her. "Do you really believe you saw a wog perform a miracle?"

"I did—then . . . but now . . . I . . ."

"You do remember, child, that no non-humanoid—wog or animal—can ever know the grace of God," Fra William said, drawing strength from her weakness. "Nothing exists except as willed by He Who is Always Humanoid."

"I have prayed, Fra," she said. "For the first time since I was a little girl, I prayed."

"You must pray fervently and read devoutly in the Holy Testament," Fra William advised. "The Holy Testament can sustain us in a hostile universe. Read *The Words of the Prophet*, the first and second chapters of *Revised Genesis*, and the *First Epistle to Procyon IV*."

"Please, Fra . . ."

"Nothing is ever simple," he said. "We are tempered through adversity. Will you come back tomorrow? Will you promise me that?"

After a long moment: "Yes, Fra. I will."

When the troubled woman was gone, Fra William allowed himself a sigh of frustration. Perhaps he should have applied to one of the merchant houses as his sister

# Discover Life Beyond the Moons



**L**ittle does Teldin Moore know there is life beyond Krynn's moons—until a disabled spelljamming ship crashes on his farm. With the dying alien's magical cloak and cryptic message, his life is changed forever. He quickly discovers he is wanted by killers and cutthroats!

So he and his alien giff companion race to solve the mysteries of the cloak and his newfound popularity. They search for Astinius of Palanthas and the gnomes of

Mt. Nevermind for clues, but will the monstrous neogi find them first? . .

Beyond the Moons, set in the DRAGONLANCE® fantasy world, is the first book in the Cloakmaster Cycle of SPELLJAMMER™ space fantasy novels. Its author, David Cook, also wrote Horselords, the first book in the Empires trilogy. Find these and other exciting fantasy novels on sale at bookstores everywhere.

Into the Void, Book Two in the Cloakmaster Cycle, is by Nigel Findley. On sale in October.



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Allyra had advised. William ached to give the woman the instant peace of mind she obviously craved, but he was no worker of miracles—and neither was any wog. His thoughts were shattered when the door of the confessional was yanked open.

"Bishop Perez wants you," Fra Mustapha said.

"But my stint in . . ."

"I'm to relieve you," Fra Mustapha muttered with ill-concealed disgust.

William edged out; the other junior priest entered and closed the door. William walked away, through the hot color-washed air. Passing before the twin martyrs of the Merchant and the Spacer, he went through the chancel to the right of the Bishop's raised balcony, where the private chapels of the planet's rich and powerful families were hidden.

At Bishop Perez's door, he pressed his palm to the security plate. The door slid open, he stepped in, and it whooshed shut with a frightening finality.

Bishop Perez sat behind a desk of black stone. Looking up from a macrotemplate, she stood and extended her hand. He reverently kissed the heavy ring fashioned from a piece of the blasted hull of the Mercantile Union Ship *Revenge*. She was very tall, with hair and eyes the color of cold moonlight.

"We have a problem, Gynt."

"Problem, Bishop Perez?"

She gestured with her hand, and a whispery voice filled the well-appointed office: "I saw something . . . impossible, Fra. I saw a wog perform a miracle."

William Gynt gaped.

"Of course we monitor confessions," Bishop Perez snapped. "What if someone uttered sedition or confessed to a crime endangering the racial or economic security of the Union? Church and State have a moral obligation to support each other, and it gives us an edge when dealing with the secular authorities. This is a good case in point." She paused, then said: "This is all confidential, naturally. Forget it until you're at least an intermediate priest."

William nodded.

"I have been in contact with certain personages . . . certain *august* personages on Pontifex," she said. "An inquisition into the matter has been ordered. Obviously, we cannot allow the secular authorities to become involved with any facet of this. As the priest who first heard the woman's confession, you shall be the church's ad interim investigator."

"To investigate the delusions of a lonely woman forced to live with a savage brute?" he demanded. "That hardly—"

She silenced him with her icy glare.

"You will consider this a Holy Mandate, Fra William," she told him. "Believe me, Cappadocia was hard won from its wogs. Officially, they are pacified, but wogs are never to be trusted, for they never forget whose world this originally was. The policy of extermination prior to possession of a planet is common sense, but it's rarely carried out because of the time and expense involved."

"But surely a hallucina—"

"The security of Cappadocia must be guarded against all dangers, real or imaginary," Bishop Perez explained. "Ideas and beliefs are imaginary, but they have toppled empires. Your task is to discover whether we are dealing with something real or imaginary in this case."

"Surely not real."

"Perhaps this woman saw nothing in the forest, perhaps even imagined this abandoned city where the 'miracle' took place," she said. "Perhaps not. The wog races are diabolic in their diversity, not only from the racial norm but from each other. Perhaps the Canites possess some innate power which could be . . . misinterpreted. That is why the secular authorities must be excluded from this investigation. If the Cappadocian wogs do actually have the power to 'raise the dead,' they become all the greater a danger to the Church . . . a danger that must be dealt with solely by the resources of the Church. You will leave tomorrow at dawn to begin your investigation."

"Leave the temple?"

"Into the forest," she said. "You will be fully kitted to include maps and nav-comp."

"But I told the woman to return tomorrow."

The Bishop nodded. "So I heard. We have her name and identity number, but, yes, that was the proper thing to do. It would be better to take her here. We will deal with the matter of her cohabitant at a later date, if necessary." She leveled her dry-ice eyes at him. "Your mission and all we have discussed is classed a Most Holy Secret. There are several possibilities for the particular city spoken of by the woman. You shall investigate them all. You will be gone several days."

"I'm not trained for all this. Wouldn't this be better handled by someone from the Inquisitorial Service?" William suggested.

"We prefer to keep this under the auspices of the local temple, for now."

"Yes, Bishop Perez."

"That is all, Fra Gynt," she said. "Go to your quarters for fasting and prayer. Pray for faith. You will need it." The nave of the temple was filled with the light of a dying sun. Saints and martyrs glowed in the twilight.

Soft vesper chants drifted to his ears: "There is but one God, and He is Forever Humanoid."

Before dawn, kitted, hungry and pious, Fra William Gynt seemed a tiny figure on the road leading from Antioch, an ancient woggish road paved much later by humanoids. He deserted the road and approached the edge of the forest, which seemed like a dark curtain rising beyond sight. The sun peeked over the horizon and the temperature began its mad climb; there he paused a moment to gaze back at Antioch—the towers and domes, the myriad unfolding flowers of the city's solar collectors, and of course, the temple, which dwarfed all other structures. Then he entered the forest, losing sight of everything familiar and comforting.

The trees were huge, gnarled, and ancient, growing close and towering beyond sight. A mossy silence enveloped him. The forest was more shadow than light, but still the heat reigned.

Later, after the murderous sun was beyond zenith, William entered the first city marked on his map and guided by the nav-comp. The ruin was vine-webbed and built of stone. The first woggish city he had ever seen, its alien beauty disturbed him.

*Though they build cities and lead patterned lives, they are no greater than the beasts of the field, water and air, Fra William recited silently. Does not the bee dwell in a hive and the ant in chambered cities? So it is with the races of space who know not the form of the Creator.*

But it looked like a city, as good as or better than many built by beings able to pass the racial equations used to determine citizenship levels in the Mercantile Union. The stones were well fitted and decorated with carvings and faded pigments. Rooftop gardens, once well tended, were now riots of color.

He thought he heard a faint humming sound—seeming like the monotone song of a strange choir of angels—coming from the blue vault visible beyond the trees. Then it stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

No telling how long the city had been abandoned—centuries, or only the thirty years since the ruling council of the Mercantile Union on Old Earth had decreed that the resources of Cappadocia had gone unexploited long enough.

Fra William knew little of Cappadocia's history—because of the many duties assigned a junior priest posted to a new temple, there had been little time for study—but he had often heard others tell how the military fist of the Mercantile Union had come down hard here, forcibly scattering the Canites from their forest cities. The Canites were allowed to exist as primitive nomads, as long as they made no trouble for Cappadocia's new masters.

He found nothing in the first city.

Nor in the city he entered the next day.

In the second city, also, he seemed to hear the distant humming of heavenly voices, but the sounds quickly gave way to the silence of the forest. He feared that some fever or hallucination had overtaken him in the wilderness, but he could not turn from the task given him; plagued by vision or insanity, he had to continue onward.

His second night in the wilderness found William camped in a tree-bore ten meters above the ground. He read his Holy Testament by the tiny light of a lantern, seeking solace and finding none. His Holy Testament was a real book, an antique once carried by pilgrims between the stars. It had been given to him by his sister Allyra.

William sighed and closed the book. In the temple, his faith reinforced, he had been able to push away thoughts of her. Here he could not. Allyra was serving an indefinite term of imprisonment on Hecate for making seditious statements to a deep cover security agent. William had not been told of his sister's plight until after leaving seminary. He had considered quitting the Church, but that would have accomplished nothing. Bright little Allyra would still be caught in dark Hecate.

He finally extinguished the lantern. Several times dur-

ing the heated Cappadocian night he heard furtive sounds below. In the morning he packed his pilgrim's kit and climbed down. The soft humus carried the spoor of many creatures.

He was thankful for the maps but more so for the nav-comp tied in to Cappadocia's orbiting navigation system. Lacking it, he would have wandered endlessly in a world where the vista never changed. He knew he was close to the third Canite city, but it still startled him when it burst into view. It was so huge.

Among the massive buildings were even more massive trees, their limbs spreading and intertwining into a screening maze. Near the center of the city was a pyramidal structure that challenged the arboreal columns.

William strode quickly through the sluggish air. Minutes later he stood at the base of the broad steps sweeping up the structure. Three-quarters of the way up lay a vanyan leaf, withered in the dappled sunlight.

In the silence of the city, Fra William Gynt became suddenly nervous. The walls of the building at the pyramid's summit were covered with Canite colossi . . . with humanoid, recalling the temple carvings of the proto-civilizations of Old Earth, the heart of the Mercantile Union.

A trapezoidal doorway opened into darkness.

Approaching the structure, his attention was captured and held by the sight before him and he did not notice the city was no longer silent—that whispings rose from the streets, that the forest was full of sighings and murmurings.

At a shuffling sound from within, William jumped back. The darkness took the form of a Canite. It was the first wog he had seen in the flesh.

*Having the form of God, we are the rightful sons and daughters of the true God. That which has intelligence and not the form of God is an abomination.*

The Canite had soft grey fur and wore a soiled robe. Its floppy ears fell on either side of its blockish head. The eyes were liquidly soft; they seemed to hold a measure of compassion and intelligence, and William crossed himself at the heretical observation.

"Speak the man-talk?"

The Canite stared.

"I am Fra William Gynt of the Unified Humanoid Church, here by Holy Mandate." He tossed out the words as if building a bulwark. "I have questions."

The Canite gestured at the carvings rising above them. "You are here in fulfillment."

A sigh rose from the streets. William spun and suddenly felt faint. A sea of Canite faces choked the vine-laced avenues.

"Fulfillment," the wog said again, indicating the carvings.

William examined the bas-reliefs. At first he had only seen the Canites and the humanoids. Now he saw beneath and among them other shapes, those of spaceships and humanoid temples. Unbidden images flooded his mind. He saw suns and planets; he saw the dark Outer Powers beyond the Sphere of Influence and humanoids reaping the whirlwind they had sown. Finally,

there were only wogs in a universe where humanity was little more than a dim-remembered legend. With an effort almost physical, William tore his gaze from the hypnotic carvings. He stared at the wog and felt a warm intrusion flow into his mind; he saw his sister, her eyes vacant and cold. He pushed the image and the presence from his mind.

"Who are you?" William demanded. "What's happening?"

The Canite murmured: "Allyra is dead."

"Who are you?" William screamed. "Answer me, wog! I command you!"

The Canite turned from William and faced the crowd. It went down the steps a short distance and began to speak, its language fluid and powerful. It was William's holy and patriotic duty to interfere, but he could not move.

Again, William heard the singing of a heavenly host, the servants of a humanoid God. This time, however, the voices did not face to silence; the sounds increased until the singing became unending and unbearable screams—the voices of demons, not angels.

The leafy canopy burst asunder in flames and smoke. A flight of tac-fighters screamed into view, each bearing the crest of the Unified Humanoid Church. The assembled Canites fled to the forest, melting into shadows as if they had never existed, giving the fighters few targets. The Canite on the pyramid did not stir. It stood still, arms and legs apart, waiting.

William fell back. How could they have known to come to this place at this time? The young priest looked at his nav-comp, remembered the angelic voices he had heard in the other Canite cities, and knew the answer. All he lacked were thirty pieces of silver. Feelings of betrayal seared him like acid.

The tac-fighters held steady before the Canite.

"No!" William shouted. "I must know!"

His words were lost in the screams of thrusters and energy beams erupting from the tac-fighters. At first, the Canite seemed unaffected by the blasts. Then it fell, as if in slow motion, crumpling. Its robes burst into flames; its fur charred and the stench of its burning flesh filled the hot, heavy air. When the Canite leader had been eliminated, the tac-fighters began a systematic destruction of the vast native city and surrounding area, beginning with the enigmatic psycho-active carvings.

William ran, barely escaping in time. He ran until he could run no longer. He sat on a massive limb, and that was where Bishop Perez and the search party found him.

"At least you're safe, thank He Who is Forever Humanoid," she said without emotion. "Those stupid vapor-breathers were supposed to lift you out before they started in."

William looked up at her. "They were?"

"Of course," she snapped. "What did you think?"

William did not know what to think.

Even after a debriefing by agents of the Church's Inquisitorial Service, William did not know what to think. Bishop Perez assigned him duties in the temple archives where it was quiet; he worked there fifteen years before being transferred to the archives on Pontifex. During that time, he studied everything about the Canites and the history of Cappadocia, and there he came across the account of the ill-fated spaceliner *Caestus*, which carried the first involuntary colonists to Cappadocia.

The *Caestus* imploded as it entered a Clarke orbit. The glowing wreckage hung in stationary orbit until removed by the Planetary Engineering Corps, hung like an unmoving star above the very city in which Fra William Gynt would give a Canite over to death thirty years later. The most puzzling aspect, to William's thinking, was that the destruction of the *Caestus* seemed to mark an exodus of the Canites from their cities. Teeming vine-hung cities of stone were abandoned in a single night. The planet had not been hard-won, as he had been told; lacking heroes, they had to be invented.

The body of the dead Canite was brought to Antioch. William heard rumors that it had vanished under guard, stolen by Canites and humanoid secessionists; he also heard that it had been shipped to the Church laboratories on Pontifex for dissection.

In the quietude of the archives, William secretly wondered what prophecies had been fulfilled by the humanoids, he in particular. His mind always went back to those cryptic carvings, which had been fashioned as much from spirit as from stone. He had seen down the long count of years, ages hence, when the seed of hatred sown by the Mercantile Union would bring utter destruction to humanoids. It was a searing vision he dared not share.

A century later, when Fra William Gynt had become Cardinal William Gynt and was nearing death, he often pondered the events that had transpired in the deep Cappadocian forest. When he doubted the prophecy he had seen carved upon the walls, the Canite's last words returned to haunt him.

At that moment, his sister Allyra was indeed dead, killed in the chambered darkness of Hecate at the hands of a zealous guard. However, the mercantile Union Penal Corps did not inform the family until ten years after the fact.

In his secret heart as he lay upon his deathbed, surrounded by the priests to whom he had always been an inspiration of faith, Cardinal William Gynt commended his immortal soul to woggish gods. ♦

# Absolutely Charming

Michael A. Stackpole

I felt tremors of anticipation ripple through me as the postman took the folded slip of paper from my hand. The look of indifference in his flat eyes died beneath the wave of lustful hunger that surged onto his face. His mouth hung open as his eyes devoured each word, and his lips faithfully echoed them a second later. His eyes flicked from word to word, faster and faster as he neared the end of the paper. Then he flipped it over, greedily looking for more.

When he saw he had read it all, he reread it quickly, and would have started on it a third time, but my hand closed on the paper. He tried to pull away, but I folded the sheet, hiding the writing from him, and he snapped out of it. Reluctantly he let me pluck the paper from his hand.

"My God, that's great!" He wiped his brow with a yellowed handkerchief. "Is there any more? There's got to be more. I mean, that's the best thing I've ever read. My God, Mr. Daye, you're a genius!"

I smiled in a kindly fashion. "Thank you, Carter. It's just a little thing I tossed off this morning."

The mailman gave me a low

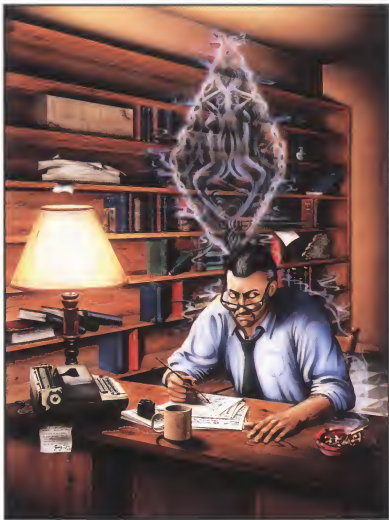


Illustration by Gary Freestrom

whistle. "Boy, I thought you gave up writing five years ago, after that guy rejected your book. I mean, you know, I haven't read your book, but if it's anything like this, that editor was a fool."

I forced my ire away at the mention of *bim* and maintained the cordial facade on my face. "Yes, well, editors are known for momentary lapses in judgment. Perhaps he will see the error of his ways. Thank you, Carter, for your encouragement."

"Yessir, Mr. Daye." He pointed a trembling finger at the note in my hand. "When you get that published, let me know where. I'm gonna buy bunches of copies."

I contained my mirth until I'd shut the door and shot the bolts, then let it ring loudly within the confines of my dingy domicile. I crumpled the slip of paper in my left hand, then carelessly tossed it into a corner. I had succeeded! After five years of research, trial, and testing, I had done it. I had discovered the secret, and now that I knew it, I would have my revenge.

I stooped and recovered the ball of paper, then smoothed it out against the cover of *The Grand Albert*. A simple, slender piece of ruled paper, it was unremarkable. It was actually less than that, this collection of words that imbecile Carter had seen as a great work of literature. Feeling the power surge through me, I started reading it aloud. "Clorox, assort. soup, rice 1 lb, toilet paper . . ." My oration was subsumed by laughter.

The words would have been nothing if not for the device I had painstakingly inscribed at the head of the sheet and now was hiding beneath the ball of my thumb. This was what had taken five years of delving into arcane tomes. Elusive and deceptive, I tracked it through aged parchments that had not been touched in centuries. I waded through witch-hunter diaries and forbidden books of lore in languages long thought dead but pulsing with power. A hint here, a clue there led me on my quest for a symbol of power, a symbol because of which men and women had perished in legions.

Ultimately, my quest was frustrated because all trace of the sigil I sought had been destroyed. Those who knew its power had learned to fear it, so they caused all representations of it to be destroyed. However, other sigils that had adopted bits and pieces of it, to steal some of its power, still remained. Like an archaeologist or a geneticist, I tracked back to this Eve of arcane symbols. I stole a piece from the Key of Solomon here and the Enochian alphabet there. Little by little, slowly, methodically, and scientifically, I synthesized the device I had so long hunted.

I brought it back from extinction.

I recreated the Siren Sigil, and I knew it was good.

Carter had proved it. Carter, my simpleton lab rat, had endured countless lists of nonsense as I tried out variations on him. Some provided curious and amusing reactions, but none, until this morning, had given me what I wanted. Carter, under the Siren Sigil's influence, gobbled up my grocery list like it was some tawdry thriller and he could not put it down. He wanted more and, when there was none, read again what I had written. From that fragment alone, he deduced I was a liter-

ary genius.

If it had worked on Carter, certainly it would work on *bim*.

I crossed through the musty stacks of books piled like stalagmites on the floor of my front room and into the bedroom. Feeling invincible, I reached up and pulled the framed letter from its place above my bed. My spur, the thorn in my side, the driving force in my quest, this letter had haunted me since Carter had borne it to my door. Over the years, when despair had sapped me of strength and will, I had reread it to fill me again with rage. Now, with victory in my grasp, I allowed myself the luxury of again reading of my humiliation.

Dear Mr. Daye,

Under normal circumstances, as a common courtesy, I undertake to thank writers for sending their work here to Mountain Books. However, in your submission I find nothing that motivates me to do this. I do appreciate, in both your cover letter and Chapter 3, your expressing your opinion of the "sub-standard and puerile" work we have produced in our various lines. Repetition of that criticism in Chapters 7, 12, and 127 might be viewed as excessive, no doubt motivated by your belief that our "moronic editors" would be "incapable of recognizing subtlety if it jumped up and shot them with a nuclear particle accelerator (sic)."

I must agree with your assertion that your work is difficult to bracket, though not, as you suggest, "because literature, as a concept, is really too limited to encompass [your] work."

You are not Dostoevsky.

You are not Dickens.

You are not literate.

The novel you have submitted to us is useful only as a dictionary of mercilessly overworked clichés. I would call your characters cardboard, but I am not of a mind to insult cardboard. Elizabeth Taylor's entire wardrobe is less purple than your prose. The suspension of disbelief necessary to accept your tale is only exceeded by that which is required to believe we would actually consider publishing this work. If 50,000 chimps banging away on typewriters for years could produce Shakespeare, I would guess that 50,000 Hiram Dayes banging away on typewriters could produce an almost publishable CumQuik novel.

I truly hope this is the only novel you have attempted. If not, I fear your

home could be classed a toxic waste dump by the EPA. You should be reported to the Surgeon General for sending this work out without a warning label, and were the Nuremberg court still in session I would report you for human rights violations for producing this work.

If, by some twisted piece of logic (of which you are most assuredly capable), you do not understand that I suggest you cease and desist all writing, please do not consider Mountain Books a possible market for your work. The same goes for any and all relatives you have.

May you live in interesting times,

Gordon Cobb  
Editor in Chief

I flung the frame away from me and it smashed against the wall. Chuckling to myself, I reached up on my highest shelf and pulled down the box containing my manuscript. Lovingly I blew the half-decade's accumulation of dust from its lid. Setting the box down on the bed, I opened it and pulled the 600-page manuscript forth. Clutching it to my breast, I headed back out to my work table.

*Love's Chainsaw Caress* would finally see print!

I resisted the temptation to paint the Siren Sigil on the cover page. That page was superfluous and likely would not be copied were the manuscript duplicated within the publishing company. Also, I assumed that were the sigil to exert its influence in the mail room, it would take forever for my manuscript to reach *his* hand. I turned to the first page and, in the wasted white space at the head of the Preface, I set to work.

Dipping my narrow brush in the bottle of black ink, I started to draw the Siren Sigil. With serpentine forms I created the lozenge device that encompassed the whole of the design and empowered it. Near the top I then added the triskele vortex that would draw the reader down into the work. Light shading and twists through the lines hinted at seductive feminine curves and the womb-warmth we all distantly remember and crave. This urged the reader on and reassured him that no matter what else he had read, nothing could be more right or perfect than what he was about to experience.

Strong, quick tentacles laced down from that and intertwined in a morass of Celtic knotwork. This firmly placed my work as part of reality and suffused the reader with the knowledge that he was truly capable of adjudicating what was art and what was not. Clearly, in the reader's mind, my work deserved exaltation as the highest form of human endeavor in the world of literature and in all of art.

Finished, I resisted the trap of wanting to admire my own work. I had slipped an index card over the first

half of the design as I worked on the second. I knew that, had I allowed myself to succumb to temptation, I would have read through my book, and again and again until I fainted from starvation or something sufficiently distracting tore me away from the manuscript. Three days of reading and rereading the TV Guide on which I'd idly doodled the sigil convinced me not to make that same mistake twice.

I returned the title page to its place, then put the cover letter I'd prepared earlier in the week on top of it. This time I refrained from giving *him* the benefit of my wisdom. In fact, other than a strongly worded suggestion to include the "design" on page one of the manuscript on the first page of the novel, my letter was perhaps the most banal thing I had ever written.

Carefully packaging up the manuscript, I hauled it down to the post office. I resisted the temptation to send it express, and relied on Priority Mail to get it to New York in two days. Revenge should be savored, I reminded myself, and an express-mailed manuscript would instantly send up a red flag. This would not do. I wanted *him* taken utterly unawares.

The next week was one of exquisite agony. I started and stopped three different novels featuring Clint Kerge, the hero of *Love's Chainsaw Caress*. Countless were the times I picked up the phone to call Mountain Books, but I always hung up before *he* could be put on the line. No. No! I would not tip my hand. The time to gloat would come later, when *Caress* had made me a fortune and I had *him* groveling at my feet at my hideaway on the Côte d'Azur. Begging for my next novel, *he* would be, and I'd tease him and lead him on, then deny him, lashing out with those words of his, the words I'd long since had burned into my brain.

Toward the end of the week I had resolved to buy, with the huge advance they would offer me, a video camera. I realized that the real money would be made with the movie version of *Caress*, and I felt fairly certain the sigil would function in a film or video format. For a half-second I felt a chill as it occurred to me that some television executives might already know of my secret and might have been using it for years.

Then, on Saturday, Carter appeared at my door. I signed for the Express Mail package he had for me, then shut the door on his simpering whine for another look at what he had read before. When I told him I had destroyed it as unworthy, he wilted and began to moan. As I tore the package open, the sound of his pitiful voice faded from my consciousness.

The letter was from *him*.

Obssequious is a delicious word that feels perfect in the mouth for spitting out with derision. To describe his letter as obsequious, however, would be to describe the sun as a photon or an ocean as a molecule. I read the letter as avidly as Carter had read my grocery list. "Brilliant . . . unparalleled work of a scope and vision unimagined before . . . gritty and realistic, yet fantastic and allegorical . . . a genius for description, characterization, and plotting . . . a masterpiece from a Grandmaster of the English language."

Yes, yes, he had said everything I expected and more. I'd sunk the hook in and gotten him. He said he was rushing the book into production and assumed I would find the enclosed contracts satisfactory. "Sign both, put them in the SASE, send them and we'll be in business."

He closed with, "Until I read your book, I had been an atheist. Reading your work has convinced me that God does exist and he has smiled upon you."

My own laughter ringing in my ears, I sat at my desk to look at the contracts. "The author warrants . . ." Yes, standard boilerplate. I hitched as I came to the clause in which Mountain Books retained all serial rights to the work, but I let that slide. Whatever paltry sum they could get for a mere excerpt would be insignificant compared to the fortune the novel would make me. Publishing excerpts from the novel would just be advertising as far as I was concerned, so I could see throwing them the bone of letting them keep the money they got from it.

On I read, faster and faster. The legalese flew past, seeking to entangle me in copious clauses, but I sorted them through. Then I hit another rough spot: no advance for the book! And another: royalties of .0001% of cover, due once a century, on the 29th of February!

Further and further I raced through the contract. Outrage upon outrage was heaped upon me and my novel. Mountain Books retained all rights to foreign editions and book club editions, and had to pay me *nothing*. They demanded exclusivity from me, with a new novel coming every three months for as long as I lived. I would move to New York and live in their building and write for them; then when I perished, they wanted the right to farm my work out to any hack willing to work beneath my name!

My jaw dropped in utter disbelief. Here Gordon Cobb—he—had proclaimed my work akin to that of something penned by God, yet some grasping flunkie in his legal department sought to deprive me of my due. Some little, empire-building munchkin with a sheepskin from South Bayou College of Law and Cosmetology, no doubt. Well, he would learn to rue the day he dared draft this mandate of involuntary servitude. When I got through with *him*, he would be through with this moron!

In a fury I flipped to the last page of the contract and stopped cold. Gordon Cobb had already signed the contract. How could he have allowed this travesty to go out over his signature? Did he not know with whom he was dealing? Could he not see he was cutting off his nose to spite his face?

Then, down toward the bottom of the page, I saw it. I recognized the gentle shape of its triangular outline. The tendrils flaring off like black flames began to writhe as though fanned by an unfelt breeze. The uneven scales at its heart righted themselves as I tilted my head to study it. Its shape, its simplicity, its invitation to join the fold. It all made sense.

The Thrall's Sigil.

I picked up my pen. ♦

## What We're After

(Continued from page 4)

got so caught up in the style that you enjoyed the story for that reason.

Style was also a major factor in our decision to publish Sharon Farber's story, "The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep," in new issue #2. A murder mystery set in the time of the dinosaurs would almost have to be humorous no matter how it was written, but Sharon's choice to do the piece the way Raymond Chandler might have written it gave the story an appeal that made it an instant winner for us.

### III. Presentation

Often the line between style and presentation can be hard to pinpoint, mostly because "style" is such a multifaceted concept. I look at presentation as having to do with structure—how a story is composed, how it is segmented, how the parts contribute to the whole.

Some stories don't have distinct segments; some ideas can only be explored in one mode of presentation. But when an idea is expressed in an unusual type of story structure—and when that structure, in retrospect, seems like the *best* way that story could have been effectively told, then the author has made a breakthrough in presentation, and he or she has written a story we're probably going to want to publish.

In new issue #2, Greg Stewart told a bizarre and intriguing story in "the button, and what you know." What helped make it bizarre and intriguing was the presentation. The same story, written in standard prose style (indent the first line of every paragraph, capitalize the first word of every sentence, ho hum), might still have been interesting . . . but would we have accepted it for publication? Probably not.

In this issue, "Holos at an Exhibition" shows off another aspect of presentation. It's a story told in segments—and furthermore, Bruce Boston and Bob Frazier start each segment by telling you precisely what you're about to experience as the plot unfolds. Well, maybe "precisely" isn't the right word. . . . Anyway, it was the structure of this story that added to its appeal for us and helped us decide we couldn't get along without it.

Having said all that, the only thing left to do is add the disclaimer: As time goes on and we produce more and more issues of the new version of AMAZING Stories, we'll be refining our thoughts on What We're After; the kind of story we like right now will probably not be entirely the same as what we prefer six months from now. That's the way it should be, because if we're too rigid in defining our tastes then we limit each issue of this magazine to being a clone of what has come before it. And what we're after is anything *but* that. ♦

# The Perfect Hero

Elizabeth Moon



Illustration by Gregory Hirdley

It was always a problem, and one that Joyce faced with her usual spunk and determination. The hero. He had to be handsome enough—but not impossibly handsome, certainly not on the edge of beautiful. He had to be masterful enough—but also sensitive and nurturing. He had to be intelligent, sensual, witty, clever, deft, sweet-smelling, and either All-American or subtly foreign, and he had to be all that and yet completely different from

all her other heroes and any hero her editor had seen recently in someone else's book.

Her other recent heroes—dark Dirk, laughing Larry, splendidly sensuous Stephen, brilliant Bart—flashed before her mind like a row of stained glass windows, impossibly bright. Nothing followed. She'd done the slightly crooked front teeth, the cowl, the slight limp from an old wound, the crooked smile, the broken nose . . . what else? Nothing. No names swam around in her subconscious, but she suddenly realized that her heroes had been given the names she had once planned to give her twenty-seven *sons*.

For a few moments she sat back, amazed to recall that at age eleven she had indeed told Sara Jane Clemp that she was going to have twenty-seven sons and she already had names for all of them. Miles, Gordon, Victor, Paul, Stefan (European forms had been out the year the book was published; she'd bowed to editorial rule), Dirk, Derek, Sandor (Sandy, in print), and so on. Twenty-seven books . . . her *sons*? Sons with AIDS (that was Harry, who'd been a paramedic, infected while crawling over bloodstained broken glass to save someone's life in a car wreck), and infertility (Beau: he lost his in 'Nam, then a fashionable villain), and every other tragedy of modern life (paraplegic Paul, crippled in a skiing accident; hemophilic Miles, whose first wife had been unable to endure the sight of his poor bruised body; addicted Gordon, whose own father had turned him on to the hard stuff in high school, but who finally came out of it better than before, with the love of a good woman to help him).

She felt ill. Worse than ill: flat nauseated. Her *sons*? In her daydreams, her sons had been sturdy boys, playing sandlot ball, riding scruffy ponies down to the river to fish, building treehouses and homemade wagons, and consuming enormous amounts of ice cream and oatmeal cookies. Had she really turned them into twenty-seven lame ducks all needing some *girl* to get them out of trouble? And she hadn't even noticed. Distraught, she fled from her study into the landscaped garden her books had provided her.

Outside in bright sunlight, surrounded by spring flowers and birdsong, she felt slightly better. Much better, even; well enough to take a brisk walk down toward the creek. There was absolutely nothing wrong with romances, nothing at all. Entertainment is a worthy goal, she reminded herself, and after all she put a lot of research into her books. If anyone wanted to know about safe sex, or what factor eight meant to a hemophilic, it was in there, somewhere, usually in a speech by the hero to the heroine. They'd be more likely to remember it, she was sure, with that useful bit of knowledge packaged in something sweeter . . . a spoonful of sugar, as Mary Poppins always says, she told herself.

But what could she do for a new hero? *Surely* twenty-seven wasn't the end of her imagination! Hair? Not brown with gold highlights, or shining black, or the soft gold of autumn . . . those were her last three. Red? No. That was the fourth one back. Size . . . medium. That was safe. Lots of men were medium. Eyes . . . change-

able. (The phrase "contact lenses" wandered through her mind, and she stomped on it. Bart had worn glasses, thick rims framing his rugged face, or brilliant eyes, or something like that, but none of them wore contact lenses. Heroes do not get grit in their lenses and have to tilt their heads sideways, blinking furiously and tugging on an eyelid, to get it out and stop the pain.) She was trying to make herself visualize skin tone and body hair when she realized that she'd wandered well into the brushy part of the north pasture.

And someone was there.

Someone male.

Someone nude.

Someone watching her with undisguised, as it were, delight.

Or something. That noun rather than the other stuck with her as she tried not to look where every book she'd written told her to look while not appearing to look. Something. Maybe not undisguised delight, and maybe not (now that she *bad* looked, more than once) what she'd first thought.

Male, yes. Nude, almost certainly. But not . . . not precisely . . . human.

She remembered how much she'd always despised science fiction; the only women who wrote science fiction had to be lesbians (she'd heard about some of them) or withered-up old crones without one scrap of feminine warmth. Stories full of bits of engineering, that practically clanked and rattled on the page; stories full of impossibly detailed plans for doing something no one would want to do anyway. (Go into *space*? Where you have to wear suits all over and are stuck on one stinky little capsule and sleep hooked to the wall like a tired old cat? And do it for *years*, just to reach something that might be a planet circling some other star, where even if it is a planet no one will have any luxurious condominiums built yet?)

On the other hand.

On the other hand, *if* you are going to find a naked male something that looks all too much like the things on the covers that she never looked at except to wonder why on earth bookstores wasted so much shelf space on the junk . . . then you just might wish you were a science fiction writer. Maybe. She looked again. Still male, still nude, still not . . . much at all human. But, on the other hand, not that bad. Not really.

Something nudged her subconscious, a feeling that registered in her upper mind as queasiness, and then as an idea . . . a palpable, live, idea. A book-type idea. Such as . . . well . . . nothing so simple as having a girl fall for the alien because he has the biggest endowment for the performing arts anyone has ever seen . . . no, that was too obvious . . . but something on that order, only subtler. Maybe he had something else going for him too. She peeked again.

He wasn't where her imagination had left him. He was beside her. Bronzed arm, yes. Or maybe tentacle, but anyway bronzed. Faint masculine odor of whatever it was (machine oil? alien spice? she'd have to find a way to ask). Tall, even unearthly tall. Eyes . . . too

many. She blinked, and decided that a little editing would be more tasteful than the raw truth. She looked down, and then wished she hadn't. It was, indeed, going to be indescribable. The words she'd used before rang through her mind, and as rapidly disappeared. Nothing seemed to fit what she was seeing. Incomparable, maybe.

But that didn't matter. She was a professional writer, capable of handling these little details in a tasteful and professional way, and besides—she looked up at the plethora of eyes and other appendages—besides, she had something better than an idea for a new book. She had a whole new concept—she was going to revolutionize the industry.

She was going to put some heart and soul into science fiction, and some modern realism into romance, and weld them (she was proud of that technological metaphor) into a new and stronger genre of popular fic-

tion. Real human drama, albeit with one alien partner, but she was sure that under all that hard, muscular chest (or carapace) beat a heart driven by the same pulsing rhythms, the same basic biological drives, as any mere human male.

And if her heroes (or villains, she reminded herself) were *alien*, they were infinitely variable. Just because *this* alien had—she looked sideways again to remind herself—so many of this, and so many of that, didn't mean that every alien would be the same. Only in one thing—she looked at it, winced, and re-edited her internal description—only in one thing, which could be *tastefully* handled, need they be the same. They could have tentacles, or forty-five arms, or three heads . . . her mind whirled, delighted at all that freedom.

She'd have done it, too, if she'd recognized the alien's ovipositor for what it was, and gotten away before it ate her and deposited all those eggs in the tree. ♦

# AMAZING<sup>®</sup> STORIES

## Congratulates

### The 1990 NEBULA AWARD Winners

Novel	<b>Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea</b> by Ursula K. Le Guin
Novella	<b>The Hemingway Hoax</b> by Joe Haldeman
Novelette	<b>Tower of Babylon</b> by Ted Chiang
Short Story	<b>Bears Discover Fire</b> by Terry Bisson
Grand Master	<b>Lester del Rey</b>

# Geologic Time: Counting the Ages

Stephen L. Gillett

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"When dinosaurs walked and the Earth was young . . ."

No way. Your story's off already.

If the Earth were a 46½-year-old human (a scale of 1 year = 100 million years), the dinosaurs walked from about years 44 through 46. Even the Cambrian explosion, the first appearance of hard-shelled life in the fossil record, didn't occur until year 40. The Earth is *old*.

How do we know all this? Let's start, like the pioneers of geology did, with a simple, common-sensical, and absurdly powerful observation, the Principle of Superposition: When sediments are laid down, the layers ("strata") on top are youngest. Furthermore, you can extend this principle in common-sense ways. For example, a fault that cuts across strata is younger than those strata. A canyon is younger than the rocks it's eroded into, and rocks filling the canyon are younger than the canyon itself.

The Principle of Superposition lets you set up a relative time scale, at least in a small area where you can see what sits on what. This is the basis of the science of stratigraphy (accent on the second syllable). But how can you extend these age relations over larger areas?

Enter another crucial, classical geologic observation: different life forms predominated at different times in the Earth's history, and their remains (fossils) are characteristic of rocks of different ages. This is the basis for the discipline known as

*biostratigraphy*, the stratigraphy of life. Rocks that contain the same fossils are the same age. Biostratigraphy lets you correlate rocks in different areas, where you can't see the physical relations directly.

Well, it's not *quite* that simple, as we'll see. But that's the basic idea, and it works pretty well.

The Principle of Superposition and the occurrence of certain fossils in certain strata led to the creation of the classical geologic time scale, whose outline was largely worked out by the end of the 19th century. It contains a whole set of poetic names (Cambrian, Devonian, Jurassic, and so forth), which mostly come from localities where fossils of those ages were first described.

Since then, the classical time scales have been subdivided, over and over again, based on more and more precise descriptions of fossil occurrences. And with the subdivisions, the details got messy, for two basic reasons.

First, I asserted that finding the same fossils in strata in different areas showed the strata to be the same age. That's not always true: after all, species have lifespans too, just like people. Because you live at the same time as your neighbor doesn't prove you're the same age. Sure, to a future historian you'll be contemporaries, and from the historian's perspective you'll be *about* the same age, but not exactly. Similarly, fossil ages get real fuzzy when you try to subdivide them too closely.

The other reason has to do with the fact that different critters live in different environments at the same time. So just because you find different fossils in different rocks, it doesn't necessarily mean they're of different ages. The sediments making up the rocks might simply have been deposited in different environments. Nowadays, for example, you don't expect crabs and cactus to grow in the same environment.

The upshot is that we have different subdivisions for different types of critters, such as for, say, marine plankton and land vertebrates. To tie the different biostratigraphic scales together at all, you have to use the Principle of Superposition in favorable areas. For example, maybe you find continental deposits, containing vertebrate bones, overlying some marine, fossil-bearing strata. Now you know that *these* vertebrates are younger than *that* marine fauna. (How much younger? That's still a problem; but at least you've narrowed it down.) Or maybe some great storm washed land plant debris far out to sea, so that it ended up deposited way out of place, with open-ocean organisms. Now you know that *those* plants were living when *these* sea creatures were.

But it's obvious that to have a detailed chronology you need *lots* of stratigraphic relations—which means you need to do a lot of careful, detailed work. You also need a little luck; Mother Nature doesn't always cooperate.

We still have another big problem, too. The classical geologic time scale is a *relative* time scale. From the Principle of Superposition, you know that this is older than that is older than this . . . for as many strata as you can see atop each other. But that's *all* you know. You don't know the age in years, the "absolute" age. You also don't know, except maybe in a very vague way, how much time it took to deposit *this* sandstone ledge or *that* coal seam. And finally, you don't know how much time there is *between* strata. If sandstone's on top of shale, you don't know whether the sandstone came about two weeks later, two years later, or two million years later. For all you know, the breaks in sedimentation—the intervals of non-deposition—represent far more time than the strata themselves. (In fact, we've found this is generally true.)

Oh, sure, you can get an idea of these things; a mountain doesn't get washed away in a couple of weeks. Still, all you can make are very crude estimates.

The discovery of radioactivity solved the problem of absolute ages. You can count the daughter nuclei formed by the decay of long-lived radioactive elements, and from that calculate the time since the radioactive element started to decay.

That's how we found out the Earth is *really* old. Not only were the original estimates of mere tens of millions of years woefully inadequate, it turned out that the classic fossil time scale covered only a fraction of the Earth's age. Most of Earth's history—a span of more than 4 billion years—is pre-Cambrian, before life forms with abundant hard parts (skeletons or shells, the only parts that fossilize easily) existed.

Doesn't this mean we can now measure geologic time in absolute years, and get rid of all those poetic but confusing geologic names? Not at all. Connecting the two age scales is difficult. Just as with connecting different fossil age scales, we need to find particular geologic occurrences to connect the relative and absolute ages.

First of all, the nature of the ages is completely different. A radiomet-

ric age is a number, in years, with a certain measurement error, say  $20 \pm 1$  million years. A biostratigraphic zone, on the other hand, has very fuzzy boundaries, because as I've said, species have life spans too.

Furthermore, the techniques work on different kinds of rocks. Dating with fossils, of course, only works on sedimentary rocks. You don't find fossils in igneous rocks (those that are made by the cooling of molten rock). However, radiometric dating does *not* work on sedimentary rocks; it only works on igneous rocks, and on some metamorphic rocks (those that are altered by great heat and pressure).

To see why, let's consider how the radiometric "clock" gets set. To calculate an age, you count the number of daughter atoms produced by the decay of the radioactive parent atoms. To count correctly, however, you have to know how many daughter atoms there were in the rock to begin with, so that you can subtract them out. It's obvious that the radioactive elements originally present on the Earth have been decaying into daughter atoms ever since the planet was formed. How do we know when to start counting daughter atoms? Why don't we just get the age of the Earth when we count?

We can get around this problem because the parent atoms and daughter atoms have different chemistries. Therefore, when a mineral is formed, the daughter and parent elements are not both incorporated in it, at least not to the same degree.

For example, rubidium-87 decays into strontium-87, with a half-life of about 87 billion years. Rubidium's chemistry is similar to potassium's, while strontium's chemistry is similar to calcium's. In a body of magma from which minerals are crystallizing, therefore, rubidium is incorporated into the potassium minerals, and strontium into the calcium minerals. Now, a few hundred million years later, if we analyze the potassium mineral, we find a little strontium-87 from rubidium-87 decay.

That's what we count. It's easy to tell such strontium apart from what was there to start with.

You can now see why radioactive age-dating doesn't work on sedimentary rocks. Sedimentary rocks contain a hodgepodge of pieces of older rocks with vastly different ages. If you tried to take a radiometric age, all you'd get would be some sort of average of the ages of the grains.

So, tying together the absolute ages with the fossil time scale means you have to look for special geologic situations and use the Principle of Superposition. For example, if you found a lava flow in the middle of a bunch of sedimentary strata, you could date it. Then you know the strata above it are younger, and those below are older.

Of course, Murphy's Law and Mother Nature being what they are, convenient lava flows are rare, so a large part of the classic fossil record is not calibrated nearly as well as we would like. And those poetic names are still useful.

All in all, calibrating the fossil record in absolute years is a major hassle. Surely there's a better way to connect the two time scales?

There may be: paleomagnetism. (Which, incidentally, is my main field of research.) Paleomagnetism ("ancient magnetism") is the study of the history of the Earth's magnetic field as it was recorded in rocks—the study of fossil magnetism.

As we all know, the Earth acts as though it contains a gigantic magnet more or less aligned with its spin axis, and it was realized by the 1950s that this field reverses its polarity at irregular intervals. That is, the north and south magnetic poles change places. (The Earth does *not* turn over during a magnetic reversal! It's just the magnetic field that changes. It's as though you had a coil with current flowing through it one way, and you swapped the wires so the current flowed the other way. You didn't turn the coil over, but the field is turned around nonetheless.)

Anyway, most rocks record the geomagnetic field when they're formed, from iron oxides they contain that act just like little compass needles. In this way you can set up a stratigraphy of magnetic reversals, a "magnetostratigraphy."

Now, both igneous rocks and sedimentary rocks see the same magnetic field reversals. Thus they can be correlated, in principle anyway. For young rocks (speaking as a geologist—rocks younger than latest Jurassic, about 160 million years ago), magnetostratigraphic correlation is easy. When new seafloor is formed at the mid-ocean ridges, in the “spreading centers” that drive plate tectonics, it records the magnetic field at the time it’s formed. Then, as the spreading continues, the new seafloor is pushed away from the ridge as newer seafloor forms behind it. Thus, seafloor spreading not only records the magnetic field direction, it preserves a nice magnetic reversal record, just as though the seafloor were an Earth-sized tape recorder.

Unfortunately, the seafloor is eventually destroyed at an oceanic trench—a “subduction zone,” where it plunges back into the Earth. So for older rocks, the reversal record is much more fragmentary, since there’s no seafloor left.

As does everything else, magnetostratigraphy has problems, too. For one thing, unlike fossils, all reversals look alike. To tell them apart, you must have a long record, so that you can see a distinctive pattern—say, something like “Here’s a long reversed zone, then a couple of short normal zones, and then a medium-sized normal zone followed by a short reversal.”

And lots can disturb the recording of a magnetostratigraphic pattern. For one thing, sedimentation rates can vary greatly; big floods might make thick deposits only once in a while, and between those times there might be no sediment deposited at all. Thus, the geologic recorder for magnetic reversals is only running sporadically.

Also, rocks can get remagnetized. Magnetism is more delicate than fossils, because it depends on the iron minerals not getting altered chemically, or getting heated too much (which resets the direction of the magnetization). But both chemical changes and reheating happen all the time, so often the magnetic record is partly overwritten.

Still, magnetostratigraphy offers yet another way of tying the various time scales together. Hence, there’s lots of active research now on it. But it also hasn’t made the classic geologic names obsolete, and it’s not likely to.

So, deciphering the geologic time scale on the Earth has taken—is taking—careful work, data from lots of different scientific specialties, and a little luck, to find useful field occurrences. But what about on the other planets? Will we have to wait for extensive fieldwork on them, to determine their histories? Well, for the detailed picture, we surely will. But we can still say quite a bit about geologic events on other planets, even just from photos.

As you know, most of the other planets are covered with impact craters—craters upon craters upon craters—formed by objects slamming in at very high speeds.

“Craters upon craters upon craters”: that should provide a clue. Let’s go back to basics—the Principle of Superposition. A crater sitting on another crater is younger than the crater it sits on. A lava flow that fills a crater is younger than the crater; craters sitting on the lava flow are younger yet.

As on Earth, such simple observations are greatly helpful in figuring out geologic history. Surprisingly, though, this stratigraphic approach wasn’t even applied to the Moon until the early 1960s, when several geologists at the U. S. Geological Survey set up geologic time scales for the Moon. This work has held up very well since the Apollo missions. In fact, impact stratigraphy is now applied routinely to all cratered planets, once we get good enough photos to see the craters.

Crater superposition is like a local stratigraphy on Earth. In a small vicinity, you can tell what’s older and what’s younger, but telling age relations between objects located half the planet apart is a problem. One way, employed by the USGS scientists, uses the extremely large craters (hundreds of kilometers across, now called “basins”), which spread material across the entire Moon. If such debris covers a crater, that crater is

older; conversely, a crater on top of the debris must be younger.

Is there another way to do rough long-distance correlations, as with fossils on Earth? Yes. You can compare the ages of surfaces by counting craters in a certain size range. As you continue to crater a surface, you reach a point where you’re clobbering old craters as fast as you’re making new ones. At that point the surface is “saturated”; it can show no more craters. Among the projectiles that cause craters, there are *lots* more small ones than large ones. Over the passage of time, on a geologic scale, a surface that gets hit by projectiles will be saturated with smaller and smaller craters. So, by determining the size of the craters with which a surface is saturated, you can get an idea of its age. For example, a surface saturated with 10-kilometer-diameter craters is younger than one saturated with 100-kilometer craters, but older than one saturated only with 1-kilometer craters.

Cratering stratigraphy furnishes a *relative* time scale, just as with the fossil stratigraphy on Earth. You don’t *know* whether that next crater was made one week later or several million years later. Sure, you can make estimates (if a 10-kilometer crater is formed every 1 million years, how long does it take to saturate a surface of a certain size with 10-kilometer craters?). But, in the absence of other information, you don’t know that the cratering was uniform. There may have been bursts of projectiles interspersed with gaps.

When we got rocks back from the Moon, we could get some absolute ages for the first time, from radiometric dating. It turns out that the very heavily cratered areas on the Moon, including all the huge basins, are extremely old. This “late heavy bombardment” had ceased by about 4 billion years ago. (It’s called “late” because it came after the actual formation—“accretion”—of the Moon itself.) Objects have continued to strike the Moon since, but at a much lower rate.

With these absolute Moon dates, we can now even make a stab at correlating geologic time between

planets. We see a record of intense bombardment on most of the other planets, and the Principle of Superposition tells us that this bombardment is old. (We don't see this record on the Earth, the Jovian moons Io and Europa, or Venus; all those worlds have active geologic processes that sweep craters away.) If this heavy bombardment is the same as the one that affected the Moon, that means all these heavily cratered surfaces are also extremely old, about 4 billion years.

Many scientists now think the late heavy bombardment reflects the sweeping up of left-over planetesimals, asteroid-sized bodies that didn't get incorporated into planets initially. The sweeping-out took so long—about 600 million years—because the planetesimals were not originally in orbits that intersected the planets'. Over time, though, their orbits were perturbed (primarily by Jupiter, because it's so big) into orbits that *did* intersect. Then, sooner or later, they collided. The present asteroids are probably the tiny fraction of objects that found their way into stable orbits instead.

But all this is still inference. The only calibration comes from those dates on those Moon rocks. And conceivably the Moon's record might be biased. Maybe, for example, many large lunar craters are other Earth satellites that were swept up early on. Or maybe the impact rates on Mars were higher, because of its proximity to the asteroid belt. Or maybe the heavily cratered surfaces on Mercury record collisions with "vulcanoids," planetesimals originally orbiting between Mercury and the Sun. Or maybe . . .

So, confirming the age (or ages!) of the "late heavy bombardment" awaits sampling the other planets, so we can get radiometric dates. We just have to go look.

Any volunteers for a field trip? ♦

# About the Authors

**John Morressy** has said that his science fiction stories are "founded on the assumption that the human race, in future ages, will behave much as it always has in the past." Building on that rather mundane-sounding premise, John has created a body of work that's anything but mundane.

"Except My Life . . ." marks John's first appearance in this magazine, in a career that spans more than twenty years. When we wrote to him and expressed our hope that he would have more work in this magazine from now on, his reply was simple and to the point: "Me!"

**James Morrow** is another one of the seven writers who are appearing in *AMAZING*® Stories for the first time in this issue. Jim won a 1988 Nebula Award for his short story, "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 17: The Deluge." He's at work on his fifth book, *Towing Jebovah*, which he calls "a novel about the death of God." On that basis, he'd probably describe "Arms and the Woman" as "a story about Helen of Troy." But it's much more than that. . . .

If you haven't heard of **James Alan Gardner** before . . . well, you have now. Jim was the Grand Prize winner in the most recent Writers of the Future competition. "Shadow Album" is his second sale to a professional magazine—and we're sure there will be more successes in his future.

Two more newcomers have made it into these pages by following radically different paths. **Dan Perez** has risen through the ranks, piling up a number of small-prize credits before breaking into the professional market with "Time and Again." Dan also has a story in *Under the Fang*, an anthology to be released in August.

**Chap Reaver** got here by taking a sideways step from another genre, where he hit the big time right away. *Mote*, his first published work, recently won the 1990 Edgar Award for best mystery novel of the year. "Feel Good Stuff" is his first fantasy sale.

Then there's **Phil Jennings**, who's a newcomer only in the sense that every story he writes is a new experience. "Captain Theodore and the Chileland Kommandos," his tenth appearance in these pages, is further proof of the fact that there's no such thing as a typical Jennings tale.

**Ralph Vaughan** calls himself "something of a throwback" because he chooses to do short fiction instead of novel-length work. "Stranger Gods," his first sale to this magazine, is a story we chose *not* to throw back.

**Mike Stackpole** makes his second appearance here with "Absolutely Charming"—a story that, for some reason, we found utterly irresistible. And, of course, Mike was quite happy to sign the contract we sent him.

Most of the novels **Elizabeth Moon** has written are fantasies, while the majority of her shorter works are science fiction. "The Perfect Hero," her first sale to us, is tough to categorize . . . so we'll just call it a *good* story.

It could well be that **Steve Gillett** is the most frequently published writer in this issue. In addition to a vast number of papers in technical and scientific journals, he has written nearly two dozen science articles for various magazines. "Geologic Time," which concludes on the left side of this page, is his seventh appearance in this magazine.

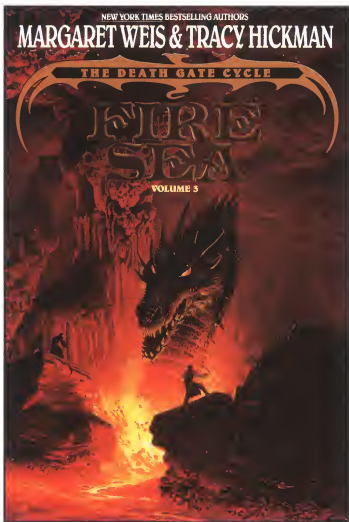
The fact that they live about three thousand miles apart, on opposite coasts, hasn't kept **Bruce Boston** and **Robert Frazier** from traveling together through the Mutant Rain Forest, the bizarre environment they created that has been the setting for many poems and at least one work of prose fiction—"Holos at an Exhibition," which is our closer for this issue. It seems fitting that the story should come out in this magazine, which is published in a place that's about halfway between where Bruce and Bob live. And we're pleased to be the middle man. ♦

Looking Forward:

# Fire Sea

by Margaret Weis  
and Tracy Hickman

Coming in August 1991 from Bantam Books



Cover art by Keith Parkinson

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

The authors of this book have long been recognized for their skill at creating detailed worlds and intricate plot lines. *Fire Sea* is the third book in the seven-book *Death Gate Cycle*, and it does nothing to weaken Margaret and Tracy's reputation.

Each of the first four books in the series takes place on a different world, a splinter of a formerly complete world shattered by magic. The only way to travel from place to place in this fragmented world is through the Death Gate. In *Fire Sea*, we follow the wizard Haplo the Patryn through the Death Gate to the third of these worlds—a place known as Abarach, the Realm of Stone.

This excerpt is taken from the chronicle of a king's attempt to save his people by descending into the caverns that are reputed to lead to the Death Gate . . . and a better world beyond.

How can I write an account of this terrible tragedy? How can I make sense of it, record it in some coherent manner? And yet I must. I promised Edmund his father's heroism would be set down for all to remember. Yet my hand shakes so that I can barely hold the pen. Not with cold. The tunnel is warm, now. And to think we welcomed the warmth! My trembling is a reaction to my recent experiences. I must concentrate.

Edmund. I will do this for Edmund.

I lift my eyes from my work and see him sitting across from me, sitting alone, as befits one in mourning. The people have made the ritual gestures of sympathy. They would have given him the customary mourning gift—food, all they have

left of value—but their prince (now their king, although he refuses to accept the crown until after the resurrection) forbade it. I composed the body's stiffening limbs and performed the preserving rites. We will carry it with us, of course.

Edmund, in his grief, begged me to give the king the final rites at this time, but I reminded the prince sternly that these rites can be done only after three complete cycles have elapsed. To do so any earlier would be far too dangerous. Our code forbids it for that very reason.

Edmund did not pursue the subject. The fact that he even could consider such an aberration was undoubtedly a result of his dazed confusion and pain. I wish he would sleep. Perhaps he will, now that everyone has left him alone. Although, if he is like me, every time he closes his eyes he will see that awful head rearing up out of the . . .

I look back over what I have written and it occurs to me that I have begun at the end, instead of the beginning. I consider destroying this page and starting again, but my parchment pages are few, too precious to waste. Besides, this is not a tale I am recounting pleasurably over glasses of chilled parfruit wine. And yet, now that I think of it, this might well be an after-dinner type of tale, for tragedy struck us—as so often happens to those in the stories—just when hope shone brightest.

The last two cycles' journeying had been easy, one might almost call them blissful. We came across a stream of fresh water, the first we'd found in the tunnels. Not only were we able to drink our fill and replenish our dwindling water supply, but we discovered fish swimming in the swift current.

Hastily we rigged nets, making them out of anything that came to hand—a woman's shawl, a baby's tattered blanket, a man's worn shirt. Adults stood out along the banks, holding the nets that were stretched out from one side to the other. The people were going about their task with a grim earnestness until Edmund, who was leading the fishing party, slipped on a rock and, arms waving wildly, tumbled into the water with a tremendous splash.

We could not tell how deep the stream was; our only source of light being the kaim-grass torches. The people cried out in alarm, several soldiers started to jump to his rescue, Edmund clambered to his feet. The water came only to his shins. Looking foolish, he began to laugh heartily at himself.

Then I heard our people laugh for the first time in many cycles.

Edmund heard them, too. He was dripping wet, yet I am convinced that the drops falling down his cheeks did not come from the stream, but bore the salty flavor of tears. Nor will I ever believe that Edmund, a sure-footed hunter, could have fallen from that bank by accident.

The prince reached out his hand to a friend, a son of one of the council members. The friend, trying to pull Edmund out, slipped on the wet shoreline. Both of them went over backward. The laughter increased, and then everyone was jumping or pretending to fall into the water. What had been a grim task turned into joyous play.

We did manage to catch some fish, eventually. We

had a grand feast, that cycle's end, and everyone slept soundly, hunger assuaged and hearts gladdened. We spent an extra cycle's time near the stream; no one wanted to leave a place so blessed by laughter and good feelings. We caught more fish, salted them down, and took them with us to supplement our supplies.

Revived by the food, the water, and the blessed warmth of the tunnel, the people's despair lifted. Their joy was increased when the king himself seemed suddenly to shake off the dark clouds of madness. He looked around, recognized Edmund, spoke to him coherently, and asked to know where we were. The king obviously remembered nothing of our journey.

The prince, blinking back his tears, showed his father the map and pointed out how close we were to the Lake of Burning Rock and, from there, Kaim Necros.

The king ate well, slept soundly, and spoke no more to his dead wife.

The following cycle everyone was awake early, packed and eager to go on. For the first time, the people began to believe that there might be a better life awaiting them than the life they had come to know in our homeland.

I kept my fears and my doubts to myself. Perhaps it was a mistake, but how could I take away their newfound hope?

A half of a cycle's travel brought us near the end of the tunnel. The floor ceased to slope downward and leveled off. The comfortable warmth had intensified to an uncomfortable heat. A red glow, emanating from the Lake of Burning Rock, lit the cavern with a light so bright we doused the torches. We could hear, echoing through the tunnel, a strange sound.

"What is that noise?" Edmund asked, bringing the people to a halt.

"I believe, Your Highness," I said hesitantly, "that what you are hearing is the sound of gases bubbling up from the depths of the magma."

He looked eager, excited. I'd seen the same expression on his face when he was small and I had offered to take him on an excursion.

"How far are we from the lake?"

"Not far, I should judge, Your Highness."

He started off. I laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Edmund, take care. Our bodies' magic has activated to protect us from the heat and the poisonous fumes, but our strength is not inexhaustible. We should proceed forward with caution, take our time."

He stopped immediately, looked intently at me.

"Why? What is there to fear? Tell me, Baltazar."

He knows me too well. I cannot conceal anything from him.

"My Prince," I said, drawing him to one side, out of earshot of the people and the king. "I cannot put a name to my fear and, therefore, I am loath to mention it."

I spread the map out on a rock. We bent over it together. The people paid little attention to us. I could see the king watching us with suspicion, however, his brow dark and furrowed.

"Pretend that we are discussing the route, Your Highness. I don't want to unduly worry your father."

Edmund, casting the king a worried glance, did as I requested, wondering in loud tones where we were.

"You see these runes, drawn over this lake on the map?" I said to him in a low voice. "I cannot tell you what they mean, but when I look at them I am filled with dread."

Edmund stared at the sigla. "You have no idea what they say?"

"Their message has been lost in time, My Prince. I cannot decipher it."

"Perhaps they warn only that the way is treacherous."

"That could be it . . ."

"But you don't think so."

"Edmund," I said, feeling my face burn with embarrassment, "I'm not sure what I think. The map itself doesn't indicate a dangerous route. As you can see, a wide path runs around the shores of the lake. A child could travel it with ease."

"The path might be cut or blocked by rock falls. We've certainly seen enough of that during our trip," Edmund stated grimly.

"Yes, but the original mapmaker would have indicated such an occurrence if it had happened during the time he was making the map. If not, he wouldn't have known about it. No, if these runes are meant to warn us of danger, that danger existed when this map was made."

"But that was so long ago! Surely the danger's gone, by now. We're like a rune-bone player beset by bad fortune. According to the odds, our luck is bound to change. You worry too much, Baltazar," Edmund added, laughing and clapping me on the shoulder.

"I hope so, My Prince," I replied gravely. "Humor me. Indulge a necromancer's foolish fears. Proceed with caution. Send the soldiers ahead to scout the area—"

I could see the king, glowering at us.

"Well, of course," snapped Edmund, irritated that I should venture to tell him his duty. "I would have done so in any case. I will mention the matter to my father."

Oh, Edmund, if only I had said more. If only you had said less. If only. Our lives are made up of "if onlys."

"Father, Baltazar thinks the path around the lake may be dangerous. You stay behind with the people and let me take the soldiers—"

"Danger!" the old king flared, with a fire that had not burned in either body or mind for a long, long time. Alas, that it should have blazed forth now! "Danger, and you tell me to stay behind! I am king. Or, at least, I was."

The old man's eyes narrowed. "I have noticed that you—with Baltazar's help, no doubt—are attempting to subvert the people's loyalty. I've seen you and the necromancer off in your dark corners, plotting and scheming. It won't work. The people will follow me, as they have always followed me!"

I heard. Everyone heard. The king's accusation echoed through the cavern. It was all I could do to keep from rushing forward and throttling the old man with my bare hands. I cared nothing for what he thought of me. My heart burned from the pain of the wound I saw inflicted on his son.

If only that fool king had known what a loyal and de-

voted son he had! If only he could have seen Edmund during those long, dreary cycles, walking by his father's side, listening patiently to the old man's mad ramblings. If only he could have seen Edmund, time and again, refuse to accept the crown, although the council knelt at his feet and begged him! If only . . .

But, no more. One must not speak ill of the dead. I can only assume some lingering madness put such ideas in the king's mind.

Edmund had gone deathly white, but he spoke with a quiet dignity that became him well. "You have misunderstood me, Father. It was necessary for me to take on myself certain responsibilities, to make certain decisions during the time of your recent illness. Reluctantly, I did so, as any here"—he gestured to the people, who were staring at their king in shock—"will tell you. No one is more pleased than I am to see you take, once more, your rightful place as ruler of the people of Cairn Teled." Edmund glanced at me, asking me silently if I wanted to reply to the accusation. I shook my head, kept my mouth closed. How could I, in honesty, deny the wish that had been in my heart, if not on my lips?

His son's words had an effect on the old king. He looked ashamed, as well he might! He started to reach out his hand, started to say something, perhaps apologize, take his son in his arms, beg his forgiveness. But pride—or madness—got the better of him. The king looked over at me, his face hardened. He turned and stalked off, calling loudly for the soldiers.

"Some of you come with me," the king commanded. "The rest of you stay here and guard the people from whatever danger the necromancer theorizes is about to befall us. He is full of theories, our necromancer. His latest is that he fancies himself the father of *my* son!"

Edmund started forward, burning words on his lips. I caught hold of his arm, held him back, shaking my head.

The king set off for the tunnel exit, followed by a small troop of about twenty. The exit was a narrow opening in the rock. The file of soldiers, walking shoulder to shoulder, would have a tough time squeezing their way through. In the distance, through the opening, the fiery light of the Lake of Burning Rock gleamed a fierce, bright red.

The people looked at each other, looked at Edmund. They seemed uncertain what to do or say. A few of the council members, however, shook their heads and made clucking sounds with their tongues. Edmund cast them a furious glance, and they immediately fell silent. When the king reached the end of the tunnel, he turned to face us.

"You and your necromancer stay with the people, Son," he shouted, and the sneer that curled his lip was audible in his voice. "Your king will return and tell you when it is safe to proceed."

Accompanied by his soldiers, he walked out of the tunnel.

If only . . .

Fire dragons possess remarkable intelligence. One is tempted to say malevolent intelligence, but, in fairness,

who are we to judge a creature our ancestors hunted almost to extinction? I have no doubt that, if the dragons could or would speak to us, they would remind us that they have good cause to hate us.

Not that this makes it any easier.

"I should have gone with him!" were the first words Edmund spoke to me, when I gently tried to remove his arms from around his father's broken, bleeding body. "I should have been at his side!"

If, at any moment in my life, I was ever tempted to believe that there might be an immortal plan, a higher power. . . . But no. To all my other faults, I will not add blasphemy!

As his father had commanded him, Edmund stayed behind. He stood tall, dignified, his face impassive. But I, who know him so well, understood that what he longed to do was to run after his father. He wanted to explain, to try to make his father understand. If only Edmund had done so, perhaps the king might have relented and apologized. Perhaps the tragedy would never have occurred.

Edmund stared out the tunnel, said no word. No one said anything. We waited in silence for what seemed to me to be an interminable length of time.

What was wrong? They could have circumnavigated the lake, by now, I was thinking to myself, when the scream resounded down the tunnel, echoed horribly off the cavern walls.

All of us recognized the voice of the king. I. . . . and his son. . . . recognized it as a warning, recognized it as his death cry.

The scream was awful, first choked with terror, then agonized, bubbling with pain. It went on and on, and its dreadful echo reverberated from the rock walls, screamed death to us over and over.

I have never in my life heard anything to equal it. I hope I never hear anything like it again. The scream might have turned the people to stone, as does, purportedly, the look of the legendary basilisk. I know that I stood frozen to the spot, my limbs paralyzed, my mind in little better condition.

The scream jolted Edmund to action.

"Father!" he shouted, and all the love that he had longed for during all the years of his life was in that cry. And, just as in his life, his cry went unanswered.

The prince ran forward, alone.

I heard the clattering of weapons and the confused sounds of battle and, above that, a dreadful roaring. I could now give a name to my fear. I knew now what the runes on the map meant.

The sight of Edmund rushing to meet the same fate as his father impelled me, at last, to act. Swiftly, with what remaining strength I had left, I wove a magical spell, like the nets in which we'd caught the fish, across the tunnel exit. Edmund saw it, tried to ignore it. He crashed full-force into it, fought and struggled against it. Drawing his sword, he attempted to cut his way through.

My magic, its power heightened by my fear for him, was strong. He couldn't get out, nor could the fire dragon—on the other side—break through the net.

At least, I hoped it couldn't. I have studied what the

ancients wrote about such creatures, and it is my belief that they underestimated the dragon's intelligence. To be safe, I ordered the people to retreat farther back down the tunnel, telling them to hide in whatever passages they could find. They fled like scared mice, council members and all, and soon no one was left in the front part of the cavern but myself and Edmund.

He struck at me, in his frustration. He pleaded with me, he begged me, he threatened to kill me if I did not remove the magical net. I remained adamant. I could see, now, around the shores of the lake, the terrible carnage taking place.

The dragon's head and neck, part of its upper body and its dagger-sharp spiked tail reared up out of the molten lava. The head and neck were black, black as the darkness left behind in Kairn Telest. Its eyes glowed a ghastly, blazing red. In its great jaws, it held the body of a struggling soldier. As Edmund and I watched in horror, it loosed its jaws and dropped him into the magma.

One by one, the fire dragon took up each of the soldiers, that were attempting, with their pitiful weapons, to battle the creature. One by one, the dragon sent them plunging into the burning lake. It left a single body on the shoreline—the body of the king. When the last soldier was gone, the dragon turned its blazing eyes on Edmund and me and stared at us for long, long moments.

I swear that I heard words, and Edmund told me later that he thought he did, too.

*You have paid the price of your passage. You may now cross.*

The eyes closed, the black head slithered down beneath and magma was gone.

Whether I actually heard the fire dragon's voice or not, something inside me told me that all was safe, the dragon would not return. I removed the magical net. Edmund dashed out of the tunnel before I could stop him. I hurried after, keeping my eyes on the boiling, churning lake.

No sign of the dragon. The prince reached his father, gathered the old man's body into his arms.

The king was dead, he had died horribly. A giant hole—inflited, perhaps, by the sharp spike on a lashing tail—had penetrated his stomach, torn through his bowels. I helped Edmund carry his father's corpse back to the tunnel. The people remained at the far end, refusing to venture anywhere near the lake.

I could not blame them. I wouldn't have gone near it either, if I hadn't heard that voice and known that it could be trusted. The dragon had taken its revenge, if that's what it was, and now was at peace.

I foresee that Edmund will have a difficult time convincing the people that it is safe to walk the path on the shore of the Lake of Burning Rock. But I know in the end that he will succeed, for the people love him and trust him and now, whether he likes it or not, they will name him their king.

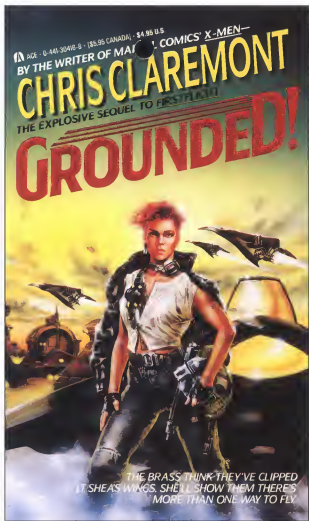
We need a king. Once we leave the shores of the lake behind, we will be in Kairn Necros. Edmund maintains we will find there a land of friends. I believe, to my sorrow, we will find there the land of our enemies. ♦

Looking Forward:

# Grounded!

by Chris Claremont

Coming in August 1991 from Ace Books



Cover art by Rayo

## Introduction by Bill Fawcett

It's not surprising that the creator of the X-Men and dozens of other comic heroes would write a novel that not only features near-constant action, but also one that approaches some classic situations in distinctive ways. In addition, Chris has managed to convey both the euphoria that must result from the opening of the stars and the gritty problems that will not go away just because man has developed space flight.

*Grounded!* is set about sixty years in the future. In *Firstflight*, this book's predecessor, astronaut Nicole Shea was responsible for making humankind's first contact with an alien species, the Halyan'ta. As this book opens, she has been grounded as the result of a crash. The problem that keeps her from returning to space is psychological as much as physical. Rather than lose the services of a highly trained employee, the space agency has her assigned as liaison to the aliens for a joint effort to build a starship that can accommodate both races. Complications arise involving two genius teenagers, several attempts to kill Nicole, and a convoluted plot to sabotage the relationship between the two races that includes a Presidential assassination.

Flying, in the air or in space, is a major element in the book. And since Chris is an experienced aviator, the scenes involving piloting are portrayed with great accuracy. One example is the following excerpt from early in the book, when the first attempt is made to kill Nicole in order to keep her from assisting on the joint ship project.

No sound, no warning, a dart-winged shape blurring past her nose, trailing twin spikes of flame as afterburners hurled it for the stars, had to have been transitioning through Mach, sonic booms creating the jet wake of a plane ten times its size, waves of solid air punching the Baron's

nose down with brutal force, throwing it one way, Nicole snapping the other, crying out as her head bounced off the wall. Alarms and telltales were flashing all across her control panel, mixing with the light show inside her skull, while some insistently heavy hand tried to shove her out of her seat and squash her flat on the ceiling.

Opened her eyes, found her glasses twisted crookedly over her nose, her body wedged in the corner formed by her seat and the left-hand side of the fuselage. World was spinning like a top, left to right, so fast she couldn't bear to look for more than a millisecond. Knew instantly what was happening, a state all fliers feared, the flat spin. Think of that top, spinning 'round and 'round on its central axis; now think of a plane doing the same thing, corkscrewing into the ground, in such a tight circle the wings can't pull decent lift from the air or the control surfaces sufficient to maneuver. And if you're not careful, when you apply power, all you do is spin faster and faster.

No noise, silence where she should have heard the comforting thrum of the engines. Simple reason for it, both propellers were standing stock-still. Again, realizations flashing faster than conscious thought, so that by the time she verbalized them to herself her body was already reacting—flying at altitude, and to reduce both fuel consumption and engine wear, she'd been running the fans lean. Meant riding a very fine line, but ordinarily that was no problem. When she ran into the jet wake, she didn't just have turbulence to cope with, but also the residue from its engines—which, on afterburners, with raw fuel being injected into the ignition chamber to intensify combustion, meant a foul soup of heavy hydrocarbons. For her engines, like flying into mud. Ruined the mixture, fouled the combustion cycle within her cylinders, starving them of the oxygen they needed to fire. Instant shutdown.

The Baron was shuddering so hard, she couldn't focus on the instruments, no notion of her altitude, didn't matter anyway, wasn't sure enough of her position to know how much clear air she had below her. Charts listed the ground as topping out at about five-six, but some of the ridge lines and attendant peaks didn't go much above four thousand feet. In this kind of madcap descent, the rate-of-climb indicator was virtually useless; if she wasted time determining how much time she had, she'd be dead before she got around to actually trying to save herself. Again, while these thoughts were popping like fireworks across the panorama of her awareness, her hands were moving of their own accord, one shifting the mixture to full rich while the other worked the fuel pump to get fresh gas into the engine. Twin fans complicated the problem, the counterclockwise spin created a centrifugal effect that pushed fuel away from the port engine, but into the starboard one. What was sufficient to start one would either be too much or too little for the other, and she had no way of knowing which except her instincts.

Turned the key, nothing happened. Hissed a curse, gritting her teeth as a burping hiccup pumped a mouthful of bile to the top of her throat. Repeated the process, concentrating on one engine, winced as a cou-

ple of popping explosions shook the aircraft, but thankful as well because the backfires meant there was combustion occurring in the cylinders. The propeller began to turn and she played with throttle and mixture, trying for the ideal combination to get it running, was surprised by the sound of her own voice crying, "Yes, yes, yes," as the triple blades spun faster and faster, the sonofabitch was running rough, more backfires with accompanying gouts of black smoke out the exhausts, but it was running. She opened the throttle wide, shoving the yoke forward, the wheel hard over, rudder pedals as well. The Baron was falling tail down—tended to happen in flat spins—now, she had to get air flowing over the wings, generate lift so the control surfaces could do their job. Of course, if she'd lost too much altitude, she'd simply be diving herself the last stretch into the desert. Not that she had any choice. The plane shuddered violently—so much so she thought it would tear apart around her—but this was a design that had stood the test of time, the private aviation equivalent of the legendary Mack truck, and as the engine roar became a shriek, matched by one of defiant fury from Nicole herself, the flight profile stabilized, the horizon settled, and with breathtaking suddenness she was once more straight and level.

For a moment all she could do was sit and stare in wonderment, while the Baron ripped through the sky a few hundred feet above the scrub rock and Joshua trees. Her breath came in the shallowest of gasps, the desperate, automatic gulps of air that a marathoner makes as he hits the "wall"—that part of the race where mind and body face their ultimate test. She didn't move, wasn't sure she could, tension had turned her into a living statue. Finally managed to reach out to the throttle and back it off from the firewall. Immediately, though, she felt a response from the controls, a dangerous sluggishness accompanied by a quiver from the altimeter; so far, she was holding her own but any less power and she'd once more be on her way down.

Belatedly, she realized no sounds were coming through her headset, discovering when she reached up that it wasn't there anymore. Her hand came away scarlet and sticky; she decided to leave well enough alone and not go exploring. So long as she could function, she didn't care how badly she was hurt; and if she couldn't function, knowing the extent of the damage wouldn't really matter. The headset and boom mike must have been torn loose when she hit the hull; she took off her glasses, stared at the mangled frame, one lens splintered by the impact. She was lucky she still had her eye.

A check of the radio display told her it was functional—*thank God*, she thought, *for small favors*—and she switched it over to the cabin speakers, taking up the hand mike from its cradle between the two front seats.

"Baron . . ." she began, then had to stop in amazement at how calmly matter-of-fact she sounded. No shakes, no quavers, nothing but a little dryness to differentiate this from a normal call on a normal flight.

"Baron One-Eight-Three-Six Sierra," she said, "calling any station. Mayday, I repeat, Mayday. Position . . . *uh*, somewhere north of Barstow, within the Edwards MOA,

altitude around six thousand. On one engine, pilot injured. Any station, please respond. Over."

The reply was instantaneous but growly with static, and she wondered if the spin had damaged her acrials.

"Baron Three-Six Sierra, Edwards TRACON, receiving you, acknowledging your declaration of emergency. Identify yourself, please."

"Nicole Shea, Lieutenant, USAF. En route to duty assignment at Edwards. Cleared through MOA to Mojave. Something—a pause, to gather and sort out recollections—"almost hit me. Very small, very fast, exhaust fouled my fans, lost both engines, got thrown into a flat spin." Her forehead furled as she put some more pieces together, she'd fallen almost a mile in a matter of seconds; if she'd hesitated in the slightest, or made a wrong move, if the engine hadn't fired that second time, there wouldn't have been a third. Too damn close. "I'm out of it now, stable flight, maybe a hundred ten knots by three hundred feet. I'd appreciate a vector direct to Edwards, over."

"Barstow is closer, Three-Six Sierra. Suggest you divert . . ."

"Understand, Edwards," she interrupted, "but there's high ground between me and Barstow, I don't know if I can get over the hump. It's pretty much downhill to you."

"How about your other engine?"

"Next item on the agenda."

"Roger, Three-Six Sierra. We have a helo scrambled and en route. If possible, squawk five-five-zero-zero—double-five, double-oh—on your transponder." The auto-scanner was out, so she entered the code manually.

"Transmitting, Edwards," she told them.

"Received, Three-Six Sierra, we got you. At this time, turn left to a heading of two-six-zero."

She made it a wide, slow, gentle turn, putting as little pressure as possible on her single engine. Once she'd settled back to the straight and level, she primed the other fan and turned the key.

The explosion nearly blew her out of the sky. A sharp bang, accompanied by a hole the size of a football erupting from the cowl, hardly any smoke, too much flame. She slapped the throttle closed, cut off all fuel, pulled the fire bottle to flood the engine with foam, at the same time fighting to regain control of an aircraft that was wallowing like a dory in heavy swell. A buzzer announced what she already knew, that she was slipping down again at the tail, coming dangerously close to a stall. More power then to the good fan, all it would take, the hell with the consequences, shove the nose down, trade off altitude for control and gamble the price wouldn't be too high. Turned out to cost a hundred feet and change. But too many red lights on the status tell-tales meant she didn't dare try to get it back. The only way she'd grab herself some more sky was to stay where she was while the land dropped away beneath her. Automatically, she swept the locality for a place to set down, if worst came to worst. Though she knew if she did, that was the end of her plane. Nasty country, though, nowhere viable.

"Three-Six Sierra, we mark a drop in altitude."

"My engine, she broke bad. Looks like, blew a cylinder. Had a fire, but that's under control. So's the aircraft. But it is not a happy puppy, Edwards."

"Treat it right, Three-Six Sierra, Baron's sure to do right by you."

Man knew his aircraft. Good for him. And maybe for her. "So far, so good," she told him. She craned forward for a better look through her windshield. "I believe, Edwards, I have your helo."

"Affirmative, Three-Six Sierra, and vice versa."

"Big sucker," she said, mostly to herself, "very impressive." Understatement actually, the Sikorsky dwarfed her Baron, each of its five rotor blades longer than the Beech's wingspan, with a cargo bay that could have easily fitted the entire fuselage. It took up station off her left side, maintaining a respectful distance, not wanting the wash of its own propellers to slap her down.

"Three-Six Sierra, Edwards."

"Go ahead, Edwards," she acknowledged.

"You have the field in sight?"

"Affirmative."

"Okay then, we're handing you over. Contact the tower on one-two-zero-point-seven."

"One-two-zero-point-seven," she repeated. "Thanks for all the help, TRACON."

"Our pleasure, Three-Six. You've come this far just fine, take it home."

"Do my best." She entered the frequency on the secondary com channel, then switched it to the primary; that way, if there was any mistake, she could always reverse back to TRACON. The tower was waiting for her.

"Altimeter zero-eight, Three-Six Sierra," they told her and she adjusted the pressure setting on her altimeter accordingly. Backup to a backup to a backup, because the same information was displayed—far more precisely—by an inertial radar altimeter and another one slave-linked through the transponder, with ground control. If she wanted, she could see her height charted to the millimeter. As it was, without making any effort, she'd managed to give herself a good twenty-five hundred feet of grace, thanks to the ground's downward slope from the high country at five thousand to the dry lakebed's twenty-two hundred. Unfortunately, as the flight progressed, her remaining engine had begun growling ever more vehement protests. She was virtually certain that at least one of the cylinders was misfiring, the head possibly—strike that, probably—cracked.

"Winds bearing three-one-one . . ."

"Damn," she said with quiet vehemence. Nearly a broadside crosswind.

". . . at fifteen, gusting to twenty-five."

Worse and worse. And she began to consider the option of ignoring the runways and putting the Baron down on the dry lake itself. No major problem with that, Rogers Dry Lake was a flat, hard pancake surface that went on for miles, an ideal place to land an aircraft. And she made the suggestion to the tower.

"We concur, Three-Six Sierra. If you're flying that close to the edge, that might be the best approach."

Terrific. Now all she had to do was pull it off. ♦

# Book Reviews



## Blind Justice

by S.N. Lewitt  
Ace Books, April 1991  
272 pages, \$3.95 (paperback)

If you look at the cover of *Blind Justice*, you might think this was a cyberpunk book, with its gritty Royo cover reminiscent of Walter Jon Williams's *Hardwired*. Lewitt even plays with cyberpunk's toys—virtual reality, people “plugging into” computers, artificial intelligence—consciously, I think, since she even includes a blatant, but humorous, reference to Gibson's “ice.”

*Blind Justice* isn't cyberpunk, though—Lewitt doesn't tie herself down to the cyberpunk formula. Instead she's grabbed the bits and pieces that interest her and written a fascinating adventure through space and time.

Émile Saint-Just is an apprentice on the free trader *Mary Damned*, owned by the Syndicat and supported by the Académie Français that controlled Beau Soliel. They're in conflict with an organization known as the Justica, an interplanetary organization that began as a way to organize and regulate trade and used its power to turn itself into a government, the rationalization being that the best way to regulate trade is to regulate everything. The *Mary Damned* is the first ship to openly defy the Justica and try to run its cargo without the proper papers.

The ship is caught, and the crew

captured and assigned to prison ships without trial. The task during their punishment is to carry cargo for the Justica through the long time-delays of near-light-speed space travel. The *Mary Damned* is set adrift and lost to the void of space. When Émile finishes his ten-year sentence he is released more than fifty years into his future to find that the Syndicat has destroyed all evidence of both the *Mary Damned* and its crew and that he doesn't—never did—exist to them. The *Mary Damned* lives on, however, as a legend throughout populated space. Émile finds out that the Justica is coming to teach Beau Soliel a lesson. Through a series of convenient coincidences, Émile recovers the *Mary Damned*, brings it back to life, and uses it to return to Beau Soliel to stop the Justica.

It's hard to argue that the good guys won in this book, because the victories are incomplete and, as far as actually overthrowing the Justica, inconsequential. It's a trend in fiction that the galaxy-sweeping changes of 50's space opera now seem unrealistic and simplistic, and authors are replacing them with victories that are more limited and personal in scope—and therefore more realistic.

In *Blind Justice*, Lewitt has mixed in a number of historical concepts, from the *Mary Celeste* to the fight of the French Underground against the Germans in WWII. Beau Soliel, while it rings truer to the Cajun-French be-

nign decadence and decay of New Orleans than to classic French culture, is still a fascinating place to visit. Overall, there are really no serious weaknesses in a very enjoyable adventure story that is accessible on a number of levels. — CVR

## The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid

by Rebecca Ore  
Tor Books, May 1991  
320 pages, \$3.95 (paperback)

With *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid*, author Rebecca Ore takes a fresh look at one of SF's classic ideas—cloning. What are the ethical and moral implications of the ability to easily and inexpensively create life?

In this book, genetic manipulation and cloning are tools of the intelligence agencies, who use them to infiltrate unfriendly governments by borrowing one of their agents and replacing them with one of our copies, suitably trained and modified to do what we want them to do. The other guys, of course, are doing it to us as well.

These chimeras—the artificial constructs—are also built for more public purposes, but have been effectively turned into the new repressed social class, being given the scut work and turned into personal playtoys for the rich. Chimeras have been so dehumanized, in fact, that their welfare is under the control of the SPCA.



One limitation of this society, though, is that it is illegal to create chimeras based on criminals. The why of this is never convincingly discussed, but that law makes the hobby of Simon Boyle, a chimera-builder for the CIA, highly illegal. He has done just that—constructed a chimera based on the criminal Billy the Kid. He rents Billy out to rich women who want to sleep with a long-dead criminal, and then watch as Simon, playing the part of Pat Garrett, comes in and kills him. Big, kinky thrills. Illegal thrills.

Everything is fine until one of his clients steals Billy. He then gets loose in 21st Century New York City. Billy has a number of neural blocks that make him see everything in the context of the time when he originally lived (an interesting way of bringing up some of the interesting alienness of Ore's setting), but his existence is a threat to Simon—if the CIA finds out that he has built an illegal chimera, the organization will kill him. He has to find and kill Billy without anyone finding out and without making anyone at the CIA curious about what he's doing.

This sets up a game of cat-and-mouse between various parties—Simon, Billy, the SPCA, the members of the pro-chimera underground that befriend Billy, and the CIA—that takes the reader through an interesting civilization where life is a cheap commodity that can be created or destroyed on a whim. Ore takes a close look at the implications of the

chimera and what it would mean to society. This book is as much about getting us to think about these implications as it is about telling a story.

Overall, *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* is a well-written and interesting book that is enjoyable to read while also raising a number of important questions about how we treat ourselves and the people around us. Recommended. — CVR

#### Goblin Moon

by Teresa Edgerton  
Ace Books, February 1991  
293 pages, \$4.50 (paperback)

One aspect of fantasy that's been popular over the last few years is the historical fantasy—works that are set in some earlier period and given some form of fantastic twist. *Goblin Moon* is set in the Georgian period, roughly the late 1700s, and Edgerton has integrated many of the classic character races into her book; we meet elves, fairies, and dwarves as well as less pleasant beings such as trolls.

One thing about the book I especially enjoyed was the way the author handled the "racial" issue. Edgerton has built a society where the various races live together in relative harmony, and as a result she doesn't draw special attention to a character just because he or she is non-human. This is a sign that the author is concerned about details; in this case, since race is not a issue to

the characters, the author shouldn't make a big deal of it either.

The story is a romantic intrigue surrounding Elsie Vorder, a young woman at the age where her mother is beginning to look at marrying her off. Elsie, however, has not been well, and the Duchess—a woman who is a human-fairy crossbreed—has been helping Elsie's mother search for a cure. Elsie's companion is Sera, a relation who was brought in to take care of her.

Into this setup, add an ancient corpse that looks exactly as he did the day he died and protects anything placed into his coffin from rotting; a satanic cult or two; some nasty trolls and other evil beings; the creation of artificial life and the bringing back of the dead; various Plans and Plots involving Elsie and Sera; and a final realization that things are not exactly what they seem. Edgerton weaves all of these aspects together in a seamless series of seemingly independent subplots that all tie together at the end.

Overall, this is a well-written and interesting book, and I only have a couple of gripes. One minor gripe is the cover—it's gorgeous, but it has absolutely nothing to do with the book. I'm not even sure we ever meet a goblin, although we do encounter an occasional troll and a few other nasties. The cover does catch the flavor, but not the fact, of the book.

The other, more important problem is the ending. It isn't one. What

we have here (and it isn't mentioned anywhere on the book) is book one of a longer series, and when we get to the end of *Goblin Moon* we've had a minor climax, but nothing of significance is resolved and the characters are still in serious trouble. The end of this book is nothing more than a stopping point until the sequel arrives.

I don't like books that don't stand alone, and I especially don't like it when the publisher doesn't warn me that the book is part of a series. When each book stands alone (as is the case with Steven Brust's Vlad Taltos series) it isn't so bad, but in this case, I feel I've been cheated because I'm buying a book that's only half a story—and I wasn't told to expect it. If the major storyline is continued across a series of books, I think it's the responsibility of the publisher to let readers know that they're investing both time and energy in a multibook series.

That said, the part of the story that's in *Goblin Moon* is quite good, and I'm looking forward to finding out what happens next. — CVR

#### **Bone Dance**

by Emma Bull  
Ace Books, May 1991  
288 pages, \$4.50 (paperback)

*Bone Dance* is Emma Bull's third novel, and again she's headed off into new territory. Her first novel, the highly acclaimed *War for the Oaks*, was one of the best fantasies of the last ten years. Her next book was *Falcon*, an interstellar space adventure/intrigue. *Bone Dance* is set on a much smaller, personal scale, the story of Sparrow, a street-smart kid surviving by wits and contacts in the jungle of a city after the postwar collapse.

Sparrow is a dealer in exotic antiquities—ancient video tapes, CD-ROMs and music from the past—in a society that is hanging on the edge, surviving by using what technology still works. Basic services such as electricity are controlled by the ruling elite living in the Tower. They use their ability to control and ration the power needed to keep what's

left of the city functioning as a way of solidifying their control on the City.

For those not part of the elite, the City is a low-tech scramble in the streets among an underworld very much like Gibson's *Sprawl*. This is the world that Sparrow moves through, although Sparrow is not really a part of the society. This difference (which, to keep from spoiling things, I'm leaving purposefully vague) gets Sparrow involved in the middle of a power struggle in the city between the ruling elite and some outsiders who have come for a long-delayed revenge.

*Bone Dance* is well written, and Bull takes her time building a complex world in which to play out her plot, which grows consistently and carefully to a climax that is both satisfying and yet somewhat frustrating—it ties up the story, but the victory is incomplete because it's primarily a personal, limited victory.

I'm not saying much about the story, because any attempt to do so would require me to give away details that I think are important to the appreciation of the book and I don't want to take a chance on ruining it for you. On every level—craft, story, characterization, the environment she built to stage it in—this is a very well done book, better than *Falcon* (which I liked), and if it doesn't reach the standards set by *War for the Oaks*, I don't consider that a problem—few writers ever produce a book as good as *War* was. *Bone Dance* has shown that she is continuing to mature as a writer and that she's going to be someone who will consistently turn out well-written, satisfying books for as long as she chooses to do so. Emma Bull is one of the few writers who causes me to drop whatever I'm reading when I get hold of something from her, because I know it'll be something that won't disappoint me. *Bone Dance* is highly recommended. — CVR

#### **Serpent Catch**

by Dave Wolverton  
Bantam, May 1991  
416 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

Stone Age societies have always held a certain appeal for science fiction and fantasy writers. Dealing with primitive viewpoint-characters is an easy way to capture or kindle a sense of wonder: the reader looks out through eyes both innocent and uninformed. It's a good recipe for adventure fiction, too, since you can throw in dinosaurs from just about every period in history.

Most readers have gone along with humans-vs.-*T. rex* stories until recently. I suspect the rapid dissemination of information on the various historic periods of this planet has rendered the lost-world story obsolete. Where can you go to find a lost continent these days? There simply aren't any left.

But mourn no more. Lost continents and lost lands à la Edgar Rice Burroughs and his imitators may have gone the way of the dinosaur, but science fiction (ever inventive and innovative as a genre) has a way around it.

If you set your world in the far future, and massage circumstances conveniently into place, you *can* have a believable lost continent today. Dave Wolverton has no less than three of them, actually, in *Serpent Catch*.

Here, humankind has spread through the stars in great leaps and bounds. Technology (of course) has kept pace, and on the moon (not planet, for some reason) Anee, scientists created what was to be the greatest zoo for extinct terrestrial animals (recreated from DNA locked in amber). Each of the three continents now has its own historically recreated terrestrial era. One continent has neanderthals (a ready source for Stone Age people).

However, mankind ran into a technologically superior race after fixing up Anee. Conveniently, these aliens drove man from the stars. Now there are humans (also with a generally low level of technology) living on the same continent as the

neanderthals, sometimes enslaving them. It's all very complicated.

As the story starts, we follow various people (some neanderthal, some homo sapiens, one halfbreed) through sundry adventures. There are slavers to be battled, monster dinosaurs to be fought, and even a grand and noble quest: to bring back a barrel full of "serpents," genetically engineered dinosaur-killers, which guard the neanderthals from dinosaurs (and seem to have died out locally).

It's an interesting book in many ways, but not the tour de force it could have been. The characters seem too mundane for their world; and though our titular hero, Tull, does rise above his station in life to battle monumental odds, his plight doesn't grip the reader the way (say) the protagonist of *Dune* does (to arbitrarily pick another work of world-building on a similarly colossal scale).

Also, the book's predilection toward mysticism (the neanderthals have shamans who can take spirit walks and see the future) also seems a misstep: yes, primitives should have their own magic, but it should be demonstrably untrue under the naked gaze of science. That's what hard SF is all about, the triumph of the rational over the irrational. Blurring genre lines is not necessarily bad, but in this case it simply doesn't feel right.

All of which isn't to say *Serpent Catcher* is a bad book; it's not. It's a straightforward update on the tried-and-true Stone Age novel formula. A lot of people will read it and enjoy it on that level. The book *could* have been more, though, and it's a pity it's not. — JGB

#### **Beggars in Spain**

by Nancy Kress

Axolot Press, March 1991

104 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover);

\$10.00 (trade paperback)

Nancy Kress is one of those rare talents: a writer who cares so much about the characters she creates that she breathes vivid life into them. She also handles fantasy and science fic-

tion with equal skill *because* she cares so much about characters.

In this case, genetic engineering has reached the point where you can custom-order children. When a billionaire orders his first daughter, he demands a new alteration: he wants someone who doesn't sleep.

But he gets more than he bargained for when the daughter turns out to be (non-identical) twins. Leisha is the custom-ordered one: beautiful, smart, sleepless. Alice is a normal human, with normal human weaknesses. Watching them grow up together makes their differences easy to compare.

When the sleepless prove better than their normal counterparts at everything they try, trouble starts. Resentment comes first. Then comes random violence. Then a new society starts to develop as more sleepless are made, and normal humans become relegated to a second-class status (and don't like it).

Leisha's role in the emerging new sleepless society, her relationship with her father and sister, and her growing maturity as a person form the core of the book. Leisha is utterly believable; the story is both moving and involving; the science is convincing. *Beggars in Spain* is one of those rare literally perfect stones. It works on every level. Seek it out.

Since it's a small-press book (Axolot is an imprint of Pulphouse Publishing), you may have trouble finding it unless you go to a specialty store. You can also order it directly from the publisher: Pulphouse Publishing, P. O. Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440. Add a couple of dollars for postage & handling. — JGB

#### **Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine (Issue Ten)**

edited by Kristine Kathryn Rusch  
Pulphouse Publishing, March 1991  
247 pages, \$25.00 (hardcover)

And speaking of Pulphouse Publishing, the company got its start with *Pulphouse*, a hardcover anthology limited to 1,250 copies. Each quarterly issue has a theme; one science fiction, one fantasy, and two horror issues per year. It's an interesting

idea, and went over well enough to let the company expand into publishing other sorts of books: single-author collections, books, and mass-market paperbacks.

Each dip Pulphouse takes into publishing has a twist to it, though. Consider:

- \* *Pulphouse* is subtitled "The Hardback Magazine," and yes, they do take subscriptions.

- \* Their single-author collections are mostly in the form of their *Author's Choice Monthly* series, in which an author picks his or her own favorite stories for the book.

- \* Their mass-market paperbacks each contain a single short story (and are called, obviously enough, "short story paperbacks").

- \* Their hardcover books contain novellas, rather than full novels.

In short, the Pulphouse people are innovators, and are willing to experiment where most other people will not.

Now, however, *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine* has reached the oh-so-mature age of ten (with only two more hardback issues scheduled before it transforms into a weekly [yes, weekly] fiction magazine).

Has it lost its steam? In some ways, yes. The novelty is certainly gone. (Perhaps that's why they are turning it into a weekly standard-sized magazine.)

After the novelty value, however, what's left? A lot of good fiction. If the hardback version of *Pulphouse* has a lasting effect on the field, it will have been for the care it took to develop a number of emerging talents: Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Ken Wisman, William F. Wu, and other such writers. You may or may not recognize their names right now, but in ten years many of these authors will be the mainstays of popular science fiction and fantasy.

Issue Ten is a special issue, and has a seasonal (winter) theme, and features fiction by (in order of appearance): Marina Finch, Kara Dalkey, Dennis Etchison, Charles de Lint, John Brunner, Michael Bishop, Ken Wisman, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, M. Elayn Harvey, Ken Wisman (again), Esther M. Friesner, Robert

Sheckley, William F. Wu, and Lisa Goldstein, plus an introduction and an article by Jon Gustafson. We start with a harvest story of a woman who is forced to marry a scarecrow for the good of her village and progress through the cold and snow and holidays to a tale of magical stories told at passover. None of the stories are bad or badly written; a few I found thematically unappealing, but that's an idiosyncratic reaction which I doubt others will share in exactly the same way. Pick your own favorites.

*Pulpbouse: The Hardback Magazine* will probably not be remembered as a magazine, despite its title. It seems to have filled the anthology-series niche once held by Terry Carr's *Universe* and Damon Knight's *Orbit*; that's where it belongs, name aside.

As with the Nancy Kress book, you can get *Pulpbouse* through specialty outlets, or directly from the publisher: Pulpbouse Publishing, P. O. Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440. Add a few dollars for postage and handling. — JGB

### One Side Laughing

by Damon Knight  
St. Martin's Press, June 1991  
224 pages, \$16.95 (hardcover)

Some writers work best at shorter lengths, and this collection shows why Damon Knight is one: his stories often work primarily on an intellectual level. They're mind games, with a lot of humor, and science fiction is only the medium which fits by chance. (I could see many of the stories here appearing first in literary magazines rather than science fiction magazines.)

Knight's "what if"s are often marvelous vignettes: What if English suddenly lost the letter "O"? What if you could get the effect of God pre-packaged in a box? What if men's and women's appearances (and genders) could be manipulated until everyone looked almost exactly alike?

But Knight isn't limited to gimmick stories by any means. Also here are stories of other worlds, time travel (sort of), and an alien explor-

ing Earth after switching bodies with a human. He deals deftly with his characters, and can make the unbelievable real (or believably unreal) when he wants to.

All of that sounds like too much praise, but Knight at his best (and he is here—these stories are culled from three decades of his writing) is as good as Bradbury or Ellison—yet in a voice just as distinctly Knight's own. — JGB

### When the Music's Over

edited by Lewis Shiner  
Bantam Spectra, May 1991  
322 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

*When the Music's Over* is an anthology with an intriguing premise and mostly fascinating stories that is undeniably well worth reading. But it's also an anthology with an agenda, and as such, it's a reviewer's bane. I can't tell you not to buy the book because I dislike its politics, but neither can those politics be ignored. And since editor Lewis Shiner is giving Greenpeace his proceeds from the anthology, buying the book itself has political implications.

Shiner's introduction says contributors were asked to write stories that resolved conflict without resorting to violence. Not surprisingly, that gives the anthology a strong anti-war thread, though only about half of the book's eighteen tales actually involve outright war. Unfortunately, nearly half the stories—including most with military elements—violate the terms of that assignment to some degree.

The problem is that in opposing war, several protagonists adopt the violence of terrorism. In Nancy Kress's "Peace of Mind," it's permissible to break into a sleeping Congressman's home and secretly inject him with a mind-altering drug. In Paul McAuley's "The Invisible Country," it's permissible for a mercenary to release a similar compound into the biosphere, trading short-term violence for long-term symbiosis. In John Shirley's "The Prince," it's permissible for protestors to kidnap a corporate executive and strand him in the middle of a violent confronta-

tion. It's permissible for Sherry Coldsmith's "Caruso" to destroy part of an orbiting weapons platform. And in Walter Jon Williams's "Prayers on the Wind," it's permissible for humankind to benefit from an unstable leader's violent actions (aliens are persuaded not to launch a war against us) because the leader eventually repudiates them. None of these stories state that violence itself is unjustified; they merely state that nonviolent ends justify minimally violent means.

Other stories fail to support Shiner's premise for other reasons. Mark Van Name's "Burning Up" offers an interesting gimmick, but his central character's choices are those of a laboratory rat reacting to auctorial stimuli. Yuri Glazkov's "Mirror Planet" preaches the futility of violence without offering an alternative. And Don Webb's "You Have the Tools" merely shifts violence's target to mysterious aliens apparently provoking the Vietnam war.

By themselves, most of these would be compelling, readable SF, particularly the Shirley and Williams pieces. And some stories do meet Shiner's challenge, notably a strong contribution from Pat Cadigan involving a family crisis. Walton Simons starts with the broad idea driving Kress's and McAuley's stories, but uses it to better effect. And James Blaylock contributes a typically mild-mannered, left-handed yarn that nevertheless meets the book's terms by having his protagonist hang up his flyswatter.

Ultimately, though, *When the Music's Over* is more controversial than idealistic. Despite Shiner's stated aims, and a forthright afterword by Richard Kadrey describing several major social advocacy organizations, the collection is a statement of frustration rather than of hope. That outcome is perhaps understandable, but the wishful marketing does the stories a disservice that would have been better avoided. — JCB

## Smart Dragons, Foolish Elves

edited by Alan Dean Foster &  
Martin Harry Greenberg  
Ace Books, April 1991  
340 pages, \$4.95 (paperback)

The title of this anthology comes perilously close to being false advertising. Of the eighteen stories the editors have assembled, only Esther Friesner's contains a dragon, and not one includes an elf. Moreover, while the book is correctly tagged as a collection of humorous fantasy, the tone is sly rather than slapstick. But though *Smart Dragons, Foolish Elves* does little to live up to its marketing, it's a surprisingly credible collection featuring an impressive range of fantasy's stranger amusements.

You'd never expect, for instance, to find Nina Kiriki Hoffman's "Savage Breasts" in a dragons-and-elves assortment. Take the title literally, try to imagine what might happen if certain parts of that statuesque secretary developed minds of their own, and you have a tale that's certifiably odd but somehow not at all implausible.

"My Mother Was a Witch" is a little less surprising but no less effective, as William Tenn raises the art of clever curses to elegant proportions. No dragons, elves, or even overt magic here, only a stylish confrontation carried off with authentic-sounding flair.

Foster and Greenberg demonstrate a distinct interest in djinni and devils, gathering wish-twisting examples from Robert Sheckley, Harlan Ellison, George Alec Effinger, John Collier, Theodore Cogswell, and Anthony Boucher. Cogswell's entry, "Things," packs the most into its punchline, though Effinger's "Unfermo" runs a close second. And Mike Resnick's quiet little "Beiber-mann's Soul" takes a perceptive potshot at writers in a related context.

There are, inevitably, a couple of misfires. Harvey Jacobs' "The Egg of the Glak" is just too long and too leisurely to support its own comic weight, and Marvin Kaye's "Ms. Lipshutz and the Goblin" is a sight-gag flattened by an overdose of logic. But neither story is as out of place

as co-editor Foster's editorial comments, which spend too much time pointing out matters of craft and too little chatting about the contributors. Foster comes across as an overage lecturer rather than a friendly master of ceremonies. It's rare to find an anthology that would be improved by omitting the editorial matter, but this one qualifies for that group.

*Smart Dragons, Foolish Elves* is easily the worst-packaged anthology I've seen in some time, but the stories under the wrapping are worth the price of admission. Those who look past the cover copy and flip through the pages should be agreeably surprised—and amused—by what they find. — JCB

## Nebula Awards 25

edited by Michael Bishop  
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,  
April 1991  
368 pages, \$24.95 (hardcover);  
\$14.95 (paperback)

There's nothing in the galley of *Nebula Awards 25* to confirm it, but among the contributors listed on the front is Bill Watterson, creator and chronicler of "Calvin & Hobbes." What's significant about this peculiar-seeming item is that, under Michael Bishop's intriguing editorship of this series, it's as likely to be an omission from the proof as it is to be a typographical error. (*Editor's update: The finished book came in the other day, and Bill Watterson is still listed in the credits on the dust jacket . . . but there's no immediate evidence of his presence anywhere inside the anthology. A mistake? A joke? Both?*)

In his now-completed three-year tenure at the helm of the Nebula anthology, Bishop continues to put out a volume that's enlightening even for those who have long since read 1989's award-winning works, a book that is as much about SF as it is SF itself. Damon Knight even puts in an appearance to argue that this year's book is really only marginally science fiction; whether you believe him or not, it's a valuable argument.

Other periphery comes from Elizabeth Ann Scarborough and Orson

Scott Card, the former discussing the evolution of her Nebula-winning novel *The Healer's War* and the latter proposing a broad re-examination of government support for popular art. (Card's comments are especially interesting when contrasted with his introduction to the recent anthology *Future on Fire*.) And there's also a perceptive essay from Ian Watson on 1989's most notable novels.

All three short-fiction Nebula winners for 1989 are in the book, of course, along with a chapter from Scarborough's novel. Bishop also includes a variety of work from among nominated stories (though not necessarily finalists): Richard Grant, John Crowley, and Gardner Dozois each appear with strong tales. A further bonus is the inclusion of poetry honored by the Science Fiction Poetry association from John M. Ford, Bruce Boston, and Robert Frazier.

The book only becomes uncomfortable when it delves too deeply into the underpinnings of the Nebula award structure, which preoccupies Bishop in his introduction and Bill Warren in an otherwise thoughtful summary of 1989's cinematic SF (for which no Nebulas are given). It's also hard to decide whether Paul Di Filippo's story, "The Great Nebula Sweep," should be taken as a somewhat arcane in-joke or an attempt at broader satire.

There's probably room for debate as to whether Bishop's Nebula anthologies have been accurate representations of the best SF from the past three years, or even of the SF most admired by the writers who sponsor the Nebulas. But Bishop gives his choices a reflectiveness and context that have made his collections unique in the growing ranks of "best-of-the-year" anthologies. That's a quality readers should appreciate, and one SFWA should try to preserve as it seeks a successor to occupy Bishop's editorial chair. — JCB ♦

# Holos at an Exhibition

**Bruce Boston  
and  
Robert Frazier**

*The scene within the cube of the sculpted holograph is both dim and cryptic. Shadow is heightened to the point where color has bled away. Only a few earth tones and the dulllest of greens remain. In the foreground three figures crouch about a piece of equipment, obscuring its nature. Whatever their task, they are dwarfed to insignificance by the forest backdrop. Even in this dimness, the gargantuan trunks that rise about them, the tubular vines and elephantine branches, are what claim the viewer's attention.*

*In one corner of the frame, a single patch of light has penetrated the dense canopy. As it breaks through the growth, the pattern it*



Illustration by Robert Frazier

*etches upon the leaves creates the illusion of a ghostly face, with wide-set eyes and lips compressed, silently watching the scene below.*

With light migrating to shadow, and strands of dusk filtering like smoke through the nearly opaque canopy of the mutant rain forest, a least-bird of paradise lit on a cobalt liana above holographer Genna Opall, causing a stir among the Indios in the camp. One man cursed beneath his breath. Another began to mumble a stuttering incantation.

The natives thought the bird ugly, its bizarre transparency a sign of ill fortune. To Genna it was a creature of rare beauty, even more beautiful than the sum of its parts: bright beady eyes, a froth of diaphanous feathers, glassy flesh shot through with fragile bones, visibly flowing veins and capillaries. She identified with the least-bird. Not because of its beauty, but because it survived in this transformed Amazonia by the same strategies she used to navigate the world beyond. They both moved swiftly, shifting from others' sights. Both pursued a goal as elusive as themselves. The bird sought survival in a hostile and constantly changing environment. Genna sought a breakthrough in the cutthroat and constantly changing *haut monde* of modern art. Fusing holography with light sculpture on image-sensitive glass solids, she planned not only to create a revolutionary form but to establish her name and fortune.

Genna unzipped the case and eased out her camera. While she quickly thumbed in a new cartridge, Mingus Jahns, the heavyside leader of their party, calmed the Indian porters and raised his rifle. Seconds later the least-bird spooked when it heard the harsh trill of a siren eagle. Genna tried to track its sudden flight with her viewfinder. Mingus's shot rang through the small clearing, shattering a branch near where the bird had perched.

Genna tossed back her dark and tangled hair. She pivoted to face Mingus, hands on her hips, the holocam swinging at her waist. Anger smoldered in her eyes, but when she spoke her voice was even. "That was a rare bird," she said. "You should have given me time for a photo."

Mingus wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his khaki shirt and smiled condescendingly. With his balding head, his untrimmed gray mustache, and the thick folds of flesh about his neck, he made her think of an aging walrus. "Be kind to your host," he warned. "It was the eagle who scared the least-bird away. Not me."

"But you tried."

"According to the Indios, that bird brings bad luck."

Genna laughed. "And you believe them?"

"They know more about the forest than we do," Mingus's small features narrowed further. "Remember, Miss Opall, *your* job is to stay out of the way and take the photos you were hired to take . . . not to put together your next show."

Genna tugged at the gold loop in one ear and straightened the collar of her camouflage fatigues. She asked herself why she tolerated men like Mingus, and

why so many were like him: self-centered, insensitive, lacking the ability to appreciate any needs other than their own. Just as they seemed lacking in any sense of wonder regarding the inexplicable changes taking place throughout the world . . . the strangest of all being the forest they now crossed. In this case she knew the answer. Since she lacked the funds to mount an expedition of her own, Mingus was her entrée to this land she so desperately wanted to holograph.

"You're jealous," she said, as the man turned his sweat-stained back on her and entered his tent.

"Jealous?" another voice asked. "Of what?"

It was their guide, Jorge, who knelt stirring the coals in a small circle of stones. Jorge dressed in black from head to foot and always carried himself with the rigid grace of a military man. More than once since their departure from the coast, Genna had caught his eyes upon her in a seemingly incurious stare. Yet he always glanced away as soon as his gaze was returned. She couldn't be sure if he were attracted to her, or merely judging the wisdom of bringing a woman, this particular woman, on their expedition.

"He's jealous of my career, of course."

Jorge removed his short-brimmed cap and ran one hand across his forehead, smoothing back his already slicked-down hair. In the shadows filling the clearing, his brows and thin mustache were so sharply etched against his pale Castilian features they could have been painted on.

"But he pays for this expedition, Señora. He pays you to take photographs of him, not of the birds. Perhaps it is *you* who are jealous of him."

"Not" Genna answered, venting her anger. "How could I be jealous of a man who relies on his wealth . . . and a gun . . . instead of his wits?"

"He is a successful man, Señora . . . a man of action. He acts on what the Indios tell him."

"You defend him," she said, "only because you allow him to treat *you* like dirt. That doesn't mean I will."

Jorge shrugged. "I have also been paid for a job. To guide us through a world where we do not belong. The jungle is our true enemy. We must learn not to fight among ourselves."

He replaced his cap squarely and turned back to his brew pot on its tripod over the coals, flipping back the lid to examine the maté simmering within. Genna expected nothing further from him, so she wandered off to the perimeter of the camp, where Paulo—Jorge's assistant—and two breech-clothed Indios were erecting a sonic projector that would offer protection against the lesser beasts of the night, and warn the sentries of the approach of anything larger.

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*Gamboge. Aquamarine. Vermilion. Colors so brilliant that at first guess one would suspect they have been computer enhanced. Acid violet. Chartreuse. Neon blue. Colors so intense and multiple that at first glance they obscure the figures beneath, and the initial impression is*

that of an abstract sculpture, reminiscent of Harding, or Weiss's "Berlin Travesty."

*It is only on closer examination that one can delineate a flock of birds, caught by the halo lens in mid-flight and full sunlight as they rise in startled flight from the brush. Despite the fact that no two are plumed alike, their common form and flock would indicate they are of the same species. The frame that surrounds them has been cast as a tetrahedron rather than a cube. Their flight leads not to the open heavens as one might expect, but to a foreshortened sky that narrows in steeply inclined planes to a single vanishing point.*

Next day, against Jorge's advice, Mingus decided they should move away from the Para River. He insisted they return to a cracked strip of pavement they had crossed the previous afternoon and follow its path deeper into the forest proper. According to their maps, dating from an era when civilization claimed this land, the pavement had at one time been a road, a tributary of the great Pan American Highway that was said to have spanned the length of the continent. Now its eroded track disappeared into dense growth.

Mingus's goal was to find the *bumani*, a species so rare that Jorge and the Indios knew it by reputation only. He believed that this near-mythic creature—part cat, part man—had abducted his wife on a hunting trip more than a year before. Since then he had become obsessed. Rightly or wrongly, he was convinced that by finding the *bumani* he would find his "beloved Therese," or at least some clue to her fate. From the distant domed city of Dallas, he had already commissioned many a South American tracker to no avail. Now he returned to take up the search with manic intensity. Jorge and the Indios he hired to guide and protect him; Genna to record the highlights of an odyssey that, at least in Mingus's mind, had taken on epic proportions.

Each night by their campfire, Mingus would unfold a plastic accordion of his wife's photos he carried in his shirt pocket. While he reminisced at length, in maudlin and idealized terms, of their unfaltering love for one another, he would force the photos upon his hirelings. Genna already knew Therese's face by heart, unexceptional but for its wide-set eyes, beautiful yet at the same time haunted, pale green eyes that reflected more than a fair share of suffering. No doubt the result, she concluded, of having to live with a man like Mingus Jahns.

An hour before dawn they broke camp and plunged into shadow. Paulo and two natives worked the front with long machetes, cutting back the barbed growth that overflowed the old highway. Although Jorge hovered close behind the trio, he seemed to command from a sullen distance. He stood tall in his black boots, a heavy machine pistol gripped in one hand and resting against his hip. Genna followed a few paces back, scanning the passing growth, alert for photo opportunities. Mingus and two more Indios, all carrying heavy packs and armed with automatic rifles and gas grenades, brought up the rear.

At this hour the forest remained immersed in sleep;

neither the birds, nor monkey frogs, nor any of the other mutated animals in the overhanging canopy, intruded on the gloomy solitude. Except for the swish and hack of the machetes, and Jorge's low monosyllabic commands, an unnatural silence reigned about them. Yet within that silence, Genna sensed something more. A presence, grave and watchful, as if some invisible denizen were observing them from the brush. She shrugged off the feeling. Neither a veteran of the mutant rain forest nor a stranger to it, she had already learned that this was a realm where imagination took flight. She knew there were dangers real enough without inventing more.

Trees of incredible girth rose about them and loomed over their heads. Deadwood stumps canted like quaint tombstones in an abandoned graveyard. Lianas hung everywhere in great tatters of lacework, some of them glowing faintly in the half light. In more open areas, where the canopy had been rent by fallen giants and sunlight had penetrated, the forest erected a lush vegetable fortress. Gnarled bamboo canes barricaded these wildlife rookeries, along with twenty-foot Spanish bayonets and multitudinous strains of rainbow-hued cacti. Here their machetes proved useless. They were forced to abandon the track of the old highway several times and circle back. Genna slapped and cursed aloud at the clouds of biting flies that paced their slow progress.

Suddenly, where only a ghostly pall had hung in the sky, the sun broke through. Morning light flooded the foliage and the forest came to life. Blue-bearded marmosets chattered as they leaped from branch to branch. The growth on every side looked faceted, as if it were made of jewels, and the dew, where it glittered on fallen leaves, shone like a sea of miniature stars beneath their feet. Genna snapped pictures furiously as a flock of iridescent ibises lifted from a clump of orange palmetto, their wings beating with increasing speed as they gained momentum.

*The man stands at cube center, not so much smiling for the camera as grimacing. A short and stocky man, dressed in kbaki, beads of sweat glistening along the length of his receding brow, his features small and screwed tightly to his face. In one raised hand he grips a large machete, its curved blade catching the light and reflecting a single ray that lengthens and hangs suspended like an imperfection in the glass. He stands poised as if to strike the brush before him, but the stance is obviously posed, no blow about to be delivered.*

*The varied play of sun and shadow in the leaves at his back suggests a hundred and more incipient organic forms . . . a panther, a dragon . . . a man with arms akimbo, an uncoiling serpent rising up and about to strike . . . a pale green face, its darkened mouth stretched catlike in the midst of a scream or exclamation.*

The air grew thick with heat and humidity, and Jorge slowed their pace. From far ahead, the low basso roar of a large animal sounded.

"Have we heard that before?" Genna asked.

Mingus stood by her side, thick hairy arms taut and his knuckles whitening upon the stock of his rifle.

"It's the *humani*," he said. "We've found it at last!"

Jorge shook his head.

"I wish we could see it," Genna mused. "I'd like to get something big on film."

Mingus grunted, pushing his way past Jorge on the narrow trail to order the men to chop faster. Paulo and the Indios looked to the Castilian, who nodded his assent.

"Señor, just so you understand . . . I give the orders."

Mingus bristled and straightened. "I'm paying a bloody fortune for this. If I want to move faster, then we'll damn well move!"

Genna sensed an electric silence settling about the two men as Jorge called their progress to a halt. More than ever his expression was etched in granite. It occurred to Genna that his distaste for Mingus might more than match her own.

Jorge gestured to the jungle before them. "If we follow you, Señor Jahns, then you can be the first one to die."

"Is that a threat?" Mingus began to lift his rifle, but Jorge blocked it with his arm and shoved it aside. He stepped in close, leaning down into the shorter man's reddening face.

"It's not a threat, Señor. Only a fool would allow an inexperienced man to lead the way in this forest. And since you would follow yourself, you are a fool twice over. Out here, the reckless are the first to die. You step into arrowroot and pfit"—he snapped his fingers next to Mingus's ear—"you are dead."

"All right, all right," Mingus said, though still standing his ground. "Just tell them to chop faster. We're losing our chance at the goddamn *humani*!"

Jorge stepped back and mockingly doffed his cap. The tension between the two men abated. "As you request, Señor."

As they again pushed forward, with Mingus now trying to help the natives clear brush, Genna leaned toward Jorge. He tipped his head to let her close enough to whisper.

"I don't see what that accomplished," she said.

"You're still taking his orders."

Jorge laughed silently, his teeth flashing in a rare grin. "It all depends on your point of view. You must learn to appreciate fine differences."

"To hell with fine differences. I'm interested in staying alive."

"Genna!" Mingus called out from ahead of them.

"You should take pictures of me with the machete."

"Hold it over your head," she told him as she left Jorge's side and approached.

Mingus smiled for the camera and cocked his arm. Paulo and the Indios continued to work.

"That's it," she said under her breath. "This is what you want." She exhausted the rest of the chips in the cartridge while Mingus postured, the holocam whirring like some jungle insect as each image recorded its string of binary code.

*Dirt brown. White. Gray. Splotches of silver and red. This time the bolo remains an abstraction even on closer examination. Whatever image has been recorded, it is blurred beyond any chance of recognition. Yet despite its lack of realism, the piece stands out as one of the most immediately striking in the exhibit. There is a sense of violent movement here, perhaps even violent death. One knows instantly . . . intuitively . . . that the bright streaks and splotches running through the cube like a random refrain are the tracks of fresh blood.*

They heard the basso roar again, this time close at hand. Mingus once more pleaded to move faster. Moments later they broke through a particularly stubborn thicket and entered a clearing. Trees still towered about them, but the track of the old highway and the land about it were clear of brush.

Jorge called a halt. He sent Paulo and one of the Indios to scout ahead. Mingus threw down his machete and fumed. He paced back and forth along the perimeter of the road, fondling his rifle, looking up and down the trail. He was a pathetic man, Genna thought, but nonetheless dangerous. The strength of his obsession gave him a kind of stature. She had noticed how the Indios, generally impassive, often treated him with deference.

"Look!" Mingus shouted, startling them all.

He was pointing to the exposed root system of a towering ceiba, his outstretched arm trembling with excitement. "Wild roses . . . There's the favorite flower. I know she must be nearby. I can feel it!"

Genna looked around. Low thorny vines with small white blossoms draped the roots of most of the trees in the area, and in some cases, had begun to twine up the trunks. Other than the trees, they were the only vegetation that survived here.

Overhead the sky had begun to darken. A low churn of distant thunder rumbled past them. By the time the scouts returned, large, widely spaced droplets splattered against the forest floor and dripped from the overhanging foliage, a slow tepid rain that did little to ease the heat of the day. Jorge conferred with Paulo and the Indios, and then announced something that disturbed Genna.

"The jungle is rarely this open. And now my men tell me it's clear of brush for at least a kilometer ahead."

"Then it should be easy to spread out and sweep the area," Mingus said.

"Paulo claims this is cleared land," Jorge continued. "And kept that way."

Genna snorted. "That's absurd. No one lives out here."

"Precisely, Señora."

"Precisely what?" Mingus looked wild-eyed and confused.

"Precisely why we'll stick together. And move cautiously."

"I'm not waiting," Mingus announced.

Jorge squinted through the falling droplets, which gave him a predatory look of shadow and power that intrigued Genna. "It is your choice, Señor. I implore the others to remain."

Mingus looked to the Indios and Paulo, who stood behind Jorge and made no move to join him. Finally he fixed his gaze on Genna.

"What about it? Do your services end here, too?"

Genna shook her head, not in denial but disgust. "You know I won't carry a gun."

Mingus smirked and patted his weapon, then stalked off along the road, which now rose up into higher country. Rain threw darkening streaks onto the grooved trunks about them. While Jorge set two men on guard and with the others began to pitch camp, Genna watched the tan of Mingus's khaki outline shrink to a blob ahead. She gasped when it disappeared, followed by a loud shriek. A single shot rang out.

"Chinga!" Jorge shouted.

He motioned his men forward. They broke into a slow run, controlled by Jorge's sense of order. Genna followed. The terrain swept up a slight ridge and across a dry stream bed, where the carcass of a tapir boiled with huge flies and gold scavenger butterflies. They moved laterally around the base of a wide gargantua tree and came upon Mingus wrestling with a silver bird, its feathers flashing like mirrors. The siren eagle clamped at his face and pecked his bald head as he struggled to beat it off, while its mate—a smaller female—circled to nip and bite at his legs.

Genna was too stunned to reach for her camera. Jorge cut the smaller bird in two with a burst from his machine pistol. Mingus's other attacker rose straight up over a low limb of the gargantua. While his men shot blindly through the leaves, Jorge rolled on the ground until he was out of the limb's shadow. He fired in a wide arc, and a bird the size of a man plummeted to the forest floor next to Genna.

The eagle had lost a wing, yet still lived. It pecked at roots and the ground with its beak, pushing itself away from her as best it could. The shattered stub of its exposed wing bone traced an uneven line in the dirt. Genna at last had the holocam in place. Bloodied silver feathers writhed in the rain-splotted tableau of her viewfinder. Her hands trembled as she took the shot. For a lengthening moment afterward, she stared straight into one of the bird's sad yellow eyes, and it seemed as if the creature were about to speak to her, to reveal some secret of the forest or of life itself. Then Paulo stepped forward and broke the eagle's neck with a vicious swing of his rifle butt.

Genna covered her mouth and turned to where Mingus lay.

"I saw her," he moaned, trying to rise. "I saw Therese! She's alive!"

"Stay still," Genna told him as she knelt by his side. "Don't move. You're just getting dirt in your wounds."

Mingus continued to fight the bird in his mind, his arms thrashing wildly about his head, and Genna had to sling her camera over one shoulder and pin him down.

After a brief arching of his back, he gave out and lay spent on a tangle of dead branches and crushed leaves. His neck and head were lacerated, bleeding profusely, too messy to determine the extent of the damage. A gash on one leg opened to the pearly gristle of ligament. More scratches covered his hands and arms. His blood speckled Genna's camouflage shirt and pants, already dampened by the rain, and she immediately wished she could change.

"All right," Jorge said. "We'll camp here and tend to Señor Jahns. Paulo, set up the sonics to stop any sucker bugs attracted by the blood. And get those dead birds outside the perimeter."

As Paulo and the Indios moved into action, Jorge came to Genna's side. Mingus's eyelids fluttered and he tried to speak, but all that came out was a frothy moan.

"He says he saw his wife?" Jorge asked.

Genna nodded.

"But where?" One arm sweeping to take in the empty woods.

At that instant—Jorge's arm in mid-swing—lightning struck the clearing, blindingly bright, momentarily blanching all color from the scene. The thunder was simultaneous and deafening, rocking the ground beneath their feet. The rain fell more rapidly. Genna blinked as an afterimage of the flash overlaid her vision and pulsed across her retina like a black-and-white hallucination. The silhouette of a woman's torso, a stylized face in stark chiaroscuro, a face she had never seen in the flesh yet knew by heart. Genna realized that Jorge was kneeling by her side and they were holding one another like frightened children. His body beneath her hands felt softer than it looked. Several moments passed before either of them gave any sign of letting go.

—

*The frame is cast as a dodecabedron, elongated and tapering at one end, so that the structure as a whole might be likened to cubist egg. Within its faceted brilliance, either nature or the biographer is playing tricks with color.*

*A cascade of wild roses fills the sculpture, blooming with such abundance that the vines from which they sprout are barely visible. The petals of each and every flower are open to their fullest and glistening with water droplets. Not red petals. Not white or yellow. But petals of the palest emerald green.*

Rain continued through midday and into the afternoon. With Mingus bandaged and resting in his tent, rendered unconscious by the poison that tipped the eagles' talons, Jorge joined Genna in hers.

They made love fiercely at first, with shared abandon, Genna's cries rising into the static of the rain. At the height of their desire, the Castilian cried out also, in Spanish, calling on a god he had long since abandoned, tears falling freely from his eyes to dapple her shoulders and breasts. As the storm abated, and their touches grew more lingering and ceased altogether, Genna felt drained

rather than sated. Turning away from Jorge in the narrow bed, she drew up her knees and folded her arms across her chest.

Everything was awry in this jungle, she thought; even basic human emotions could not be trusted. She saw the rain forest as a kind of rogue holo artist, the distortions in its vision not only altering the natural world it surveyed, but the lives and minds—the souls, if she could trust such a concept—of all who crossed its boundaries. Mingus's obsession and false bravado were magnified to the point where a normally calculating personality was transformed to that of a reckless fool. Jorge's rigid military mask grew more rigid until it cracked, revealing the child within the man. And here she was, Genna Opall, whom friends and colleagues, even lovers, had considered conservative in the ways of the flesh, having surrendered herself to a man she barely knew. If they traveled farther into the forest, would their individual distortions continue to increase? Perhaps at frame center, she thought, each of them would confront a self they could never have imagined.

Jorge cupped her body from behind with his, stroking her hair, breaking in on her thoughts.

"Why do you take pictures?" he asked.

"They're not exactly . . . pictures," Genna answered after a moment.

Jorge laughed softly. "What are they, then?"

"Just computerized images. Numbers, really. When I get back to the studio I'll project them into matrices and then play with them."

"It's not like developing a photo, then?"

"In some ways. Only I have more control over how the picture takes shape."

"I have trouble imagining this."

"It's a new process using a silicon base that is sensitive to light. It takes two-dimensional pictures and projects solid shapes from them, something like the way crystals will grow in the right solution. The final structure is inherent in each crystal. A three-dimensional solid, actually a host of possible solids, is inherent in each two-dimensional image. I alter the structures as they develop, impose my own vision on them."

"Like the rain forest imposes its vision on all that grows within it."

"Yes, in some ways it's exactly like that."

"But that doesn't answer why. Why do you take holographs?"

"It's not an easy question," Genna answered. "Why does any artist create? In part, I want to capture life and preserve it, or at least my vision of life. I want to collect people and remember them."

"Oh? Am I just another in your collection, then?"

Jorge teased, his hand slipping lower along her side and across her belly.

Although she felt both desire and need stirring within her, Genna took Jorge's wrist, gently but firmly, and lifted his hand away from her body.

After several seconds, without speaking, Jorge rolled away from her and stood. He dressed quickly and silently. Genna didn't turn to look, but she imagined the ex-

pression on his face. A bruised look of rejection . . . soon to be replaced by the stoic mask once again.

"Chinga!" Genna heard him exclaim for the second time that day, as he ducked out through the entrance of the tent. She gathered the thin blanket around her and followed, turning back the flap to look.

It was cooler outside. Sunlight had broken through the clouds, and the rain had become a rising mist, swirling back toward the sky in the wind that followed the storm. At the center of their camp, the three Indios sat crouched in a small circle, passing a burning pipe and mumbling fearfully to one another. The wild roses Mingus had noted earlier, clinging to the exposed roots of each tree, now grew up the trunks to the height of a man. Their white blossoms had more than doubled in size and were now tinged with green.

—

*Shot at close range and enlarged further, several dark wormlike creatures stand out upon a ground of blue. The blue exhibits a wrinkled and reflective texture, perhaps like that of a thin plastic sheet. Aligned in the same direction, the creatures appear to be on the march. In this blow-up they are the size of cats or small dogs. Their heads and torsos are visible in great detail: segmented, wet black, covered with erect cilia, bloated as if they have just fed.*

Whether due to a misplaced sense of duty, or because they were all now tainted with the mania of Mingus's obsession, Jorge decided to make one more try at locating the *humani*. After showing Genna how to work the sonic projectors, he set out with his men in the late afternoon, carrying a remote phone. He explained that when they wanted to reenter the camp, he would call in for her to shut off the sonics.

"Stay put," he told her twice, once before leaving and again on the phone, a few minutes after the party had disappeared over the first rise.

Genna wandered the small confines of the camp. Since the lightning flash her visual sense seemed heightened and at the same time distracted. Calm as the clearing remained, she felt barraged by the images around her—the trunks with their vines of roses, the branches overhead and the clouds moving swiftly behind them, even the plastic of their tents as it snapped in the breeze—along with the images she had experienced throughout the day—the dying eagle, Mingus patting his rifle, the sharp silhouette of Jorge's shoulder blades as he moved above her. Together, these crowded in on her consciousness with a kind of leapfrog intensity so that no single impression survived for long.

She checked on Mingus several times. Except for the gash in his leg, his wounds were not severe. He was resting peacefully, with no apparent fever. Yet either something in the siren eagle's attack or another poison of the forest had infected his system. His ruddy complexion was much paler and the flesh around his eyes, wrists and ankles was noticeably olive in hue and beginning to swell.

Again she wandered the campsite, unable to concentrate, images past and present assaulting her consciousness. Although there were several holo possibilities at hand, she could not frame a picture in her mind. Her camera remained in its case. The sonics continued to repel whatever creatures might be wandering nearby. Except for the occasional cry of an unseen bird, she might have been alone in the forest.

The calm was shattered near sundown.

Jorge's voice, so breathless and hysterical she hardly knew it as his, came crackling over the receiver, telling her to shut down the field. Moments later Jorge and the Indio known as Mercao staggered in from the woods. Between them, they half dragged and half carried the limp body of Paulo.

"He's in a bad way," Jorge said, lowering Paulo's body to the ground. "We met with eagles, then suckers. They seemed to be working in unison against us!"

"Where are the others?" she gasped.

Jorge tore open his friend's shirt without answering.

A large silver insect clung to Paulo's chest, its legs and eye stalks writhing. Jorge wrenched it free and crushed it beneath his boot heel. Paulo lay still.

"My God!" whined Jorge. "He's dead, too!"

Genna pulled him to his feet and shook him. Jorge's cap was gone and his hair now wildly awry as hers. Damp blood oozed from a wound somewhere on his scalp, plastering several dark strands to his forehead. More blood, already dry, ran in parallel tracks along one cheek.

"Get hold of yourself," she said, her arms closing about his chest and squeezing tightly. "You're still alive!"

She could feel the pounding of his heart, and his breath was heavy against her neck. He returned her embrace, yet there was no strength left in his arms. Mercao, squatting and rocking on his heels, had begun to chant.

"You're right," Jorge said after several seconds, in a voice more like his own. "It is the living who count."

He stepped back from her, coughing and nearly losing his balance. Genna helped him to the ground, leaning him back against the broad trunk of a gargantua. The green roses framed his drawn and wounded face. His eyelids began to close . . . and then snapped open.

"The sonics!" he exclaimed.

Genna reactivated the field and quickly returned to his side with the med kit from her tent. The Indio squatted nearby, motionless, his voice rising in an ululating wail, then sinking to a serpentine hiss punctuated by soft clicks. He was crushing small red seeds in his palm and daubing his face with the sticky residue. Genna tended to the gash in Jorge's scalp as best she could in the fading light. His eyes were closed but he was not asleep.

"We must bury Paulo," he told her. "The smell of death has to be covered as soon as possible."

Once his head was bandaged Jorge, drawing on some inner reserve of strength, rose to his feet. He shook Mercao from his trance and unfolded shovels from one of the packs; they both began to dig in the soft dirt. Genna lit their fire for the night, and then joined them.

"Make it wide," Jorge said. "More of us may soon die. No point in digging twice."

Genna gave Jorge a look of intense horror, but said nothing. Afterward, they ate dried beef and cold tortillas from their stores. Mercao declined the food and sat at a distance from them, smoking his pipe. Mingus had still failed to stir. By the rays of a lantern, Genna could see that the greenish swelling had begun to spread up his cheeks and along his forearms. While Mercao took the first watch, Jorge joined Genna in her tent, not to make love, but so they could hold one another against the night.

"Tomorrow we will leave for the coast," he told her. "Nothing more but death awaits us here."

She slept restlessly, her mind filled with dreams unlike any of her own. She dreamt of Mingus's accordion of plastic photos, only it contained not pictures of Therese but of her and Jorge, of dead Paulo, of the Indios, and a score or more of other faces she did not recognize. Mingus removed them from their envelopes and shuffled them like cards, laying them out upon a table, picking them up and shuffling them again. Then Therese entered the dream, not the Therese of the photos but a woman transformed by the forest and somehow a part of it. Her flesh was green like her eyes, eyes that no longer suffered but were filled with an inhuman insolence. She was naked but for the vines of wild jade roses twining from between her legs to wind about her breasts, belly and thighs. She joined Mingus in his game and they passed the cards back and forth, laughing and whispering to one another like infatuated lovers. They placed bets with the piles of chips scattered before them, not poker chips but holochips, like the ones Genna used in her camera.

"The forest is a woman," Therese told Mingus, smiling mysteriously, one narrow green hand cupping the chips in the center of the table and sweeping them to her side. "The forest is a womb."

"You are the forest," he answered, smiling back at her, oblivious of his losses, his small eyes hard with lust.

Genna saw that the table on which they shuffled and passed the card-photos was the cleanly severed stump of a gargantua. From the exposed concentric circles of its old growth, a new growth sprouted: a pale, scruffy fungus that had already begun to adhere to the cards and cover the faces on them.

Near dawn Genna awoke, alone, disturbed by a painful itch. The blue plastic walls of the tent glowed intermittently as distant flashes of heat lightning illuminated the horizon. For a moment Genna thought she was still dreaming, for the dimly flickering walls seemed to be covered with writing. When she lit her lamp, she stifled a cry. Its feeble rays revealed tiny black maggots everywhere. Some had already dropped onto her bedroll and embedded bristles in her arms.

After she methodically extracted the bars with a tweezers from the med kit and sprayed the small puncture wounds with antibiotic, Genna went to check on Mingus. His tent had also been invaded by maggots, but his cot was empty and the man was gone.

*In this larger-than-life portraiture the features of the face are grossly distorted, the flesh tattooed more intricately than on a Maori mask. Cheeks and brows swollen. Eyes mere antracitic pebbles. Jowly wattles beneath the bulb of a chin. Nostrils broadened to bestial dimensions. Open mouth like a slash of mud.*

*Even at close range, the expression of such features is unreadable. Take a step or two back and they vanish beneath the colors that scar and adorn them. In patterns geometric and organic, brilliant hues splay across the surface of the flesh . . . or rather within its surface.*

*For on closer examination once again, it appears that this is not flesh at all. Its rough and variegated texture resembles that of a canvas thickly encrusted with translucent paint.*

"At first light we'll retrace our path to the Para," Jorge told Genna over their pre-dawn cook fire, "and follow it downstream to the coast. Anything that's not essential, we leave behind."

"Not my camera," Genna told him.

Jorge shook his head and made a dismissive gesture.

"And what about Mingsu?"

The Castilian looked to the woods beyond the perimeter of their camp. The trunks of the gargantuan receded into the near darkness in irregular columns. They stood like pillars, seeming massive and numerous enough to uphold the sky, their branches cloaked in shadow, their bark obscured by the clinging vines.

"There's nothing we can do," Jorge's eyes looked sunken and desolate. With their expedition in ruins he seemed completely demoralized, any semblance of military posture abandoned. "The bastard is on his own now."

Mercao maintained his distance from them, his face streaked with red dye from the seeds, his lips moving soundlessly. Although he continued to take Jorge's orders, since the death of his fellows Mercao more than ever appeared to inhabit a world apart. He was no longer eating, but drawing on his pipe constantly. Pungent smoke from the native drug filled the clearing, and when Genna inadvertently inhaled a whiff, the rush of exultation that followed took her by surprise.

We shouldn't be retreating, she thought for a moment. We should advance farther into the forest. We should find Mingsu. Therese and the *bumani*. She felt certain they were on the verge of an incredible discovery.

Then her mood plummeted in a wave of dizziness, leaving her shaken and confused.

They were loading their packs at Jorge's direction when Mingsu returned from his night in the forest. Or at least it was the thing that Mingsu had become. The man wore his transformation for all to see. He staggered into the clearing in the half-light before dawn, looming larger than his usual bulk, with a gibbous hump weighting his shoulders, and legs that swelled through bursts in his pant seams. One arm dangled uselessly at his side while the other, outstretched and trembling, performed arcane,

sweeping gestures, as if sensing the air before it like the antenna of a bee. He spoke to no one, nor took any notice of their presence. Instead, he wandered through the campsite, halting to stare at the embers of the fire pit, at his tent, at the handles of the shovels standing in the mound of dirt near Paulo's grave; anything man-made warranted attention. He rarely looked up or appraised himself of his location, as if his steps were random and he were only able to focus on the objects immediately before him. Except for his right arm, which twitched with a life of its own, he moved like a patient newly awakened, rediscovering the world after a long and feverish dream.

"As if our problems weren't enough," Jorge said, nodding toward Mingsu.

"Mercao can handle him," Genna suggested.

"Mercao will save his own skin first," Jorge rubbed his chin and scuffed one foot in the dust. "And I'm tempted to follow his example."

"But," Genna said with a pause, as she considered the implications of Jorge's comment with regard to her own safety, "he's recovered enough to walk. He looks almost strong."

"He can walk," Jorge agreed, "but is he ready to leave? Will he do what we tell him to do?"

Genna raised her holocam and moved toward the hulking figure. Mingsu ignored her. He stared at one of the sonic projectors. His good arm danced and turned in the air above it as if he were performing a ritual exorcism, or composing sentences only he could read. His concentration was absolute. When Genna trained her camera on his face, she made a startling discovery.

Mingsu's flesh was covered with the pinched and deformed fractal structures known as Julia sets. She had seen studies of them hanging in the galleries at Soho, captured in the static medium of glass panes. These complex shapes started at a central point around Mingsu's eyes and spread in elliptical curves, like the arms of a spiral galaxy stretching out from its core of stars. Some made fuzzy vines, some paisley patterns, some webs of lace or dust clouds, some the ciliated structures visible on insect chitin under an electron microscope. And all were in constant motion and change.

Genna zoomed in while the latest pattern shrank to a circle, then a blob, then generated another fractal that grew and advanced in increasing levels of complication. The design swirled out around Mingsu's left eye with a seahorse tail, shading the lid and eye socket in a shimmering powder blue. If such a display were manifest on the skin of a man, she thought, then something elemental had infected him, something so central to his genetic make-up that it could alter the pigmentation in his cells.

But it wasn't pigment involved after all. It wasn't even skin. When Genna zoomed the lens in farther on Mingsu, to the center of one swollen cheek, she detected a film, roughly textured, that mimicked and exaggerated the lines and pores of the epidermis. This ragged growth, which appeared to be a kind of fungus, possessed a cloudy sheen that captured all colors at once. When intently focused on, an individual patch might appear

# One Against All and All Against the Saurons in a World Forever at War

CREATED BY  
**JERRY POURNELLE**

VOL. III  
**WAR WORLD**

**SAURON  
DOMINION**

**AUGUST 1991**

## **WAR WORLD III: SAURON DOMINION**

CREATED BY  
**JERRY POURNELLE**

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azure, orange, yellow or any shade, but only for a fraction of a second. Then a new wash of color would shift across it, riding the fractals like a wave, gaining intensity as it rose from within the shallow depths of its translucency. How the successive patterns and colors controlled this cycle and displayed themselves so effectively, Genna couldn't begin to guess. How Mingus managed to survive with his physiology so radically altered was a further mystery. She clicked a series of studies at different levels of magnification, and then let the camera dangle about her neck, baffled by the phenomenon.

There was little doubt that Jorge's surmise was correct. Mingus was no longer the same man who harassed his hurlings and attacked the forest with manic energy. He was passive and subdued, a captive of the vegetable integument that covered, she now realized, not only his face but his entire body, including some gauzy fluff that threaded and consumed patches of his khaki pants. Even if he were capable of communication, she doubted the man could be motivated to follow them in their retreat. He would have to be prodded. Or dragged.

A loud roar echoed through the jungle, both plaintive and menacing in its timbre. If this were truly the call of the *humani*, as Mingus claimed, the beasts were very near. As Genna raised the camera to catch any reaction from her subject, she sensed Jorge by her side. He placed one hand on her shoulder, his grip tightening. "We must leave!" he said fiercely.

A second roar sounded, and a breeze from nowhere swept the clearing. Shreds of the growth that webbed Mingus's clothes broke loose to ride the air like dandelion seeds.

Genna dodged back to avoid any contact with the swirling spores, crowding Jorge with her; yet even as her weight and posture shifted she kept her lens trained, cranking up the magnification to capture Mingus's face in full portraiture. She was operating at peak efficiency, moving like a dancer with the holocam as her balance point, each of her shots framed with an uncanny sense of timing and composition. She had experienced this kind of involvement before, this oneness with the creation at hand, while reshaping holographs in her studio, but never with such intensity, and never while working in the field. Even if this were a further dislocation of her personality, another spell the forest had cast, she accepted its enhancement of her talent and the heady rush that accompanied it without a second thought. Here was the real answer to Jorge's question about why she took holographs. This sense of timelessness . . . of durable lucidity . . . that transcended the identity known as Genna Opall.

The bestial roars became an ill-timed chorus, and Genna watched in complete fascination as a new series of changes shifted across her viewfinder. The throaty calls about them were mirrored in the light show on Mingus's face. She clicked a shot as the intricate fractals gave way to bold abstractions that pulsed with fluid ease. A wave of luminous orange claimed the distorted visage before her, flowing like lava across a miniature landscape, obliterating all in its path. Genna wondered

what the man's flesh must feel like, if each visual change also caused a corresponding change in texture. When she thought about touching Mingus, all she could imagine was the bizarre growth that covered his body crumbling beneath her fingers, infecting her own pores. She pictured herself embraced by an envelope of fungal scum as she staggered blindly into oblivion, the cries of the forest mirrored in the chaotic art across her face.

Rather than recoiling from the image, her racing mind extended its logic. That must be it. She understood at last. The patterns were not random or self-generated . . . they were a mirror. Not of the cries themselves, but of Mingus's response to them.

"Now!" Jorge shouted, wrenching the camera from her hands, causing her to lose her footing and stumble against him as the strap caught on the nape of her neck.

For the first time, Mingus seemed to notice them. He glanced up from the sonic projector and his good arm fell to his side.

"Mus fine Threesh," he said.

"What?" Genna asked.

Mingus worked his mouth open and shut to clear the elastic threads of mucus that stitched his lips. One large thread curled around his jaw and disappeared into his chin. The volcanic orange was fading from his features, replaced by colors pastel and cool, mostly green.

"Therese is here."

The man's eyes did not focus on Genna's, but stared at her mouth.

"You aren't well. We must get you back to civilization and a doctor. That's what's important now."

"With the natives at the front, we can push on."

"But, Mingus, the Indios are . . ."

"The men can hack the growth while I watch for her, follow her signs. They're everywhere."

"The three of us are all that's left," Jorge said, ". . . and we're leaving. You can either come with us or stay here and join the others."

Genna saw that Mercao had come to stand by Jorge's side, his eyes riveted on Mingus, the pipe dead in his hand. Again the breeze sprang up from nowhere. As more of the fluff from Mingus's clothes broke loose, Jorge and Genna shifted upwind, but the Indio held his ground. Several of the airborne spores lit on his hair and face. Scrofulous white like large scabs of dandruff, they stood out in sharp contrast to his darkness. Mercao made no attempt to brush them off. He continued to stare, mesmerized by the apparition before them.

"Signs everywhere," Mingus went on. He had not turned to them, but spoke to the spot where Genna had stood. "Just this morning I saw a tent flap unravel to writhing vines. The shovel handles are no longer wood . . . oh, no . . . beetles in a tight formation, barely discernible, ready to deconstruct at any moment. And other things are no longer as they seem. The signs are there. She's taking over. She's . . ."

"Mingus, you're crazy," Jorge shouted. "Shut this stuff up!"

"Green roses are blooming everywhere."

"Mingus!"

Genna said, "I don't think he can hear you."

Another roar seemed to emanate from the very air about them.

Mingus cocked his head to one side. "Therese has sent her voice. She's speaking to us."

"You see, he responds to sound."

"No, Jorge, only certain sounds. His communication is one-way."

"Therese!" Mingus yelled as he straightened his misshapen shoulders. His limp arm suddenly came to life, jerking in fits and starts like a marionette. He raised both hands, clasped with fingers intertwined, as if in supplication to the immense tangle of roses that now covered everything below fifteen meters surrounding their camp. Genna became aware of their fragrance for the first time, a dense floral pheromone, nearly sickening in its overpowering sweetness.

"Let's see if he'll respond to this," Jorge said.

Grabbing one of the shovels, he approached Mingus from the side and jabbed him with its spade.

The fabric of the man's shirt split as if it were rotted; a patch of the white growth beneath tore away. Mingus's actual flesh was revealed like a raw wound. Tiny beads of red swelled and ran into rivulets. The fungus was rooted in his veins and arteries, drawing its nutrients directly from his bloodstream. Before Genna could assimilate this horror, another was upon them. The spade of the shovel fell from the handle in Jorge's grip, and just as Mingus had predicted, the wooden handle disintegrated to countless scurrying black beetles.

The Castilian stumbled backward, beating the insects off his sleeves and trousers, cursing incomprehensibly. He called to Mercio for help, but the Indio stood motionless, rooted in place, the white flakes spreading across his face.

"Therese!" Mingus roared, oblivious of the assault and its aftermath. A fresh wave of color erupted across his forehead and flowed down his cheeks, the fractals forming and disintegrating with increasing rapidity. Other roars sounded from several directions at once, in response to his call.

Genna's heightened awareness had not deserted her. She was perceiving the clearing and the forest beyond with incredible clarity, each successive moment charged with significance. She could feel the breeze, now a steady wind, rocking the branches and rustling the leaves over their heads, wafting the scent of the roses through the camp. She could see the beetles, scattering in a widening circle from the spot where the spade of the shovel had fallen. Behind her to the east the rising sun cast long oblique rays through the foliage to speckle the ground with dancing lozenges of light. To the west the sky was immersed in the deep blue remnants of night, a few stray stars and a silver moon fading from sight. She raised the holocam and, pivoting full circle, without conscious thought, clicked off one shot after another. When she looked up from the frame of her viewfinder, beyond the field of the projectors and into the lightening woods, she could make out several huge animals circling the rose thickets. They moved on all fours with

a loping gait, their shaggy heads bent low, narrow snouts sniffing the ground before them. She knew at once that these were not the *humani*, at least not from the descriptions Mingus had given them.

"Maned wolves. Once the size of dogs," Jorge said in response to Genna's unasked question. He had returned to her side with the machine pistol gripped in bloodless hands. His tone was desperate. "As to why they're wearing roses . . ."

These Amazonian wolves stood tall and stout as bison, with high shoulders and necks ringed with a thick, rust-colored fur a shade or two darker than their body pelts. Their long ears pointed and twitched; their eyes flashed like coins minted in burning metal. Twining about their torsos, either freshly cut or rooted in their bodies as the fungus that claimed Mingus was rooted in his, were the same vines of wild roses that covered the trunks of the gargantuans. One beast directly downwind from Mingus dipped its black nose to sweep the earth, then raised it high, as if trying to sniff out a path around the compressed, high-pitched sound barrage that held it at bay. Genna flinched as the animal yawned. Its incisors were as long as her fingers, and wickedly serrated down each side.

Mingus grew increasingly agitated. Both of his arms began to writhe in the air, his entire body jerking and twisting with uncontrollable spasms. He turned awkwardly by fits and starts to face the woods, to stare directly at the wolf. The beast suddenly ceased its motion, as Mingus now did, and stared back. There appeared to be some silent message passing between man and animal, a voiceless symphony.

"Not!" Jorge screamed, as Mingus reached forward and shut off the sonics.

—

*In the foreground, frame center, a wolf with the mane of a lion raises its snout and, presumably, roars. One red eye is visible. It shines with a light of its own, as if the skull of the beast were illuminated from within. It emits a kind of feral energy that makes one uncomfortable to hold its gaze for long.*

*By its side stands the figure of a woman, draped from head to foot in vines and green roses, seductively posed with one leg and hip thrust forward. Or perhaps this is just the representation of a woman, a provocative topiary sculpture cut from leaves, from emerald thorns and petals. It is impossible to tell which. Uncertainty lies at the heart of its striking and somehow dangerous beauty.*

*Behind the two figures the woods lie in light-spotted shadow, clogged with a dark skein of intertwining growth. And farther still . . . a patch of dusky sky . . . an oblate moon so pale and featureless it could be no more than a nub of polished bone.*

The wolf trotted forward but made no move to attack. Several yards short of Mingus it gave out a high, piercing cry and sank back on its haunches, letting the tangle of vines and flowers that encircled its boxy slip to the

ground. Or so it seemed. The tangle continued to uncoil as if possessed of its own energy. Vines stretched to the height of the wolf's shoulders and beyond, taking on the form of a tall and statuesque figure. Definition increased and the figure itself materialized—a face, bare limbs, its body clothed in vines like some dryad spirit. Then the flowers and vines alone took precedence once more. Then the figure again. Genna rolled off half a dozen shots before this flickering juxtaposition ceased and the vision before them solidified to a singular image.

A woman—for the revealing lacework of vines left no doubt as to gender—stood before them with hands planted firmly against her hips, thighs spread, one leg slightly forward. Although the individual features of her countenance resembled those of Therese, this was in no way the long-suffering wife portrayed in Mingus's photos. Nor was it likely the creature was even human. A thatch of russet hair, dark as the fur of the wolves and of similar texture, fell to her waist. Her flesh was a pale green, its complexion smooth and unblemished as a sapling stripped of bark. Wide-set eyes showed a deeper sea green, nearly iridescent, and as she surveyed each of them in turn, her passing glance was cool and mercurial as the sea. Yet more than the sum of her physical attributes, her inhuman beauty, the creature before them projected a poise and surety that reached charismatic proportions. Although Genna had never wanted a woman before, she was inexplicably drawn to this woman. She felt an attraction both carnal and sublime that overshadowed her sexual identity. And she forced herself to look away.

Mercao and Jorge seemed to have no trouble staring.

For the first time since fastening on Mingus, the Indio had shifted his gaze, though he remained as fixated as before. Jorge scratched the stubble on his chin as he scanned the woman several times, head to foot. He leveled the machine pistol at her chest.

"Therese?" he said.

"The gun will do you no good."

The voice was haunting and persuasive. From the edge of her vision, Genna saw Jorge begin to lower the weapon to his side. She found herself wondering if the woman was speaking out loud to them or merely seeding their thoughts, draining their wills with a kind of hypnotic charm. Was the figure before them a Therese transformed by her sojourn in the rain forest, or some incalculable spirit of the forest that now wore a semblance of her shape? Genna's sense of clarity was gone, illusion and reality a swift jumble in her mind. Did she stand by Jorge's side in the clearing or was she already like Mingus, wandering at random through the trees, lost in fantasies of her own making? Would the entire landscape soon decompose to scurrying black beetles? Were the roses even green?

Genna looked back to Therese, and again strange thoughts welled up within her. The woman grasped the wolf by its mane, pointing the animal toward them like a weapon. Wind ruffled the mane and caused Therese's hair to billow about her face and bare shoulders. Morning light fell through the trees to illuminate the forest

behind the pair, etching every leaf and flower with exquisite precision. The composition was perfectly balanced, each of its elements inevitably in place. Yet even if the scene before her were real, Genna knew that no static photo, even a holographic one, could capture its intensity. She made no move to reach for her camera. Instead she felt the need to rush to Therese's side, to assure her they meant her no harm. She wanted to hold this woman and suffer the scratches of her thorny garments, to rip the vines aside and press her mouth to the pale green flesh.

"I have come to take Mingus."

With this mention of his name, presumably the very diminutive by which his Therese had called him, Mingus moaned and fell to his knees. Thick sighs escaped the man's lips as he began to edge forward, his body crouched low to the ground. He moved hesitantly, as a beast in heat might approach its prospective mate, irresistibly drawn yet wary of the object of its lust.

"He's in no shape to follow you," Genna heard herself say.

"He will be fine soon. The transition can sometimes be harsh."

"No damn transition here," Jorge said. "The man is dying. That fungus is eating him alive." He again raised the machine pistol, but his movement lacked intent.

"Death always precedes rebirth."

Mingus had reached Therese's side. Still on his knees, he embraced her thighs, burying his face in the trailing vines. Genna saw that small tendrils were already sprouting along his own back. Therese accepted his attentions but took no notice of him. She gazed directly at Genna, and the unabashed invitation in the woman's eyes forced Genna to look away as before, in shame and confusion.

"You're welcome to join us . . . all of you."

"Join you?" Jorge said pointlessly. "What do you mean? We're already here." His voice was breathless, a thin shade of its former self.

Next to succumb was Mercao. Perhaps because of Therese's proximity, the patches of fungi had already merged to cover his features, their shifting colors mingling with the red of his face paint. The Indio stumbled forward, prostrating himself in the dirt at Therese's feet, his body trembling with fear or excitement.

"Yes," Therese laughed, a sound unnerving in its girl-ish simplicity. "I have known many of your brothers."

Clearly they were not the first travelers through the forest to encounter this creature that manifested itself as Therese Jahns. How many others, Genna wondered, had been induced to join her in this vegetable transmutation and whatever bizarre existence it entailed? Did the forest abound with beings once human but no longer, vines and leaves and flowers that had been living flesh?

Jorge, visibly aroused, fell to one knee, either to conceal his condition or because he was no longer capable of standing. He made the sign of the cross like a reflex, and then dug his fists into the dirt. Genna didn't understand how, in his weakened and demoralized state, he had managed to resist the seductive power that flowed

from Therese this long. Yet as she helplessly met the woman's eyes once more, it became clear. It was not Jorge that Therese wanted, but she. And there was no longer any doubt that Therese was speaking within her mind, speaking directly to her. Not with words, but the message came clear. Their desire was mutual. She wanted Genna to join her, not only sexually, for that was but a small part of what she offered. Therese spoke not only to her sensual needs, but to her aspirations. She was more than some dryad spirit spawned by the constant mutations of the forest. Rather the reverse was true. Therese was a creator of the forest, or at least of this area she now inhabited. And she was inviting Genna to join her in that creation . . . to live out the ultimate dream of artistic megalomania as she helped to shape and reshape the fauna and flora all about them like some immense living holograph.

Yet even as this vision claimed her conscious mind and Genna took a faltering step forward, she discovered a part of herself that resisted and remained separate, not denying the force of the emotions that raged through her and left her trembling, but observing and interpreting them, claiming them as a source for further expression even as they transpired. It was the artist within her, that very part of herself that Therese sought to possess. And it was that same self that now understood that although there was great beauty here, perhaps even greater passion, the spirit that fashioned and ruled this world was ruled in turn only by endless curiosity, by arbitrary and childish whims that left it indifferent to whatever suffering or joy it engendered.

Genna knelt by Jorge's side and, taking one of his clenched fists in both of her hands, she pried his fingers apart and pressed their palms together. And when she felt his grip tightening on hers, and she could sense the growing warmth in their touch, she spoke back from within her mind to this spirit who called her. She silently screamed her denial with all the strength of her human soul.

Therese shrugged as only a goddess could, supremely indifferent to her loss. There would always be others.

She turned away. Both Mingus and Mercao, or whatever vegetal monstrosities they had become, rose and

turned with her. The maned wolf turned too, but not before it gave both Genna and Jorge one final glance, its eyes flaming with a knowledge that belied its form. It was a look filled with disdain and disregard, as if it too, like the mistress it obeyed, were a superior creature.

Genna and Jorge watched Therese and her wards retreat through the trees. The other wolves that had circled the campsite followed in their wake. As the strange entourage grew smaller in the distance and vanished over a rise, the wind that swept the forest suddenly died. A preternatural silence, undisturbed by the call of bird or beast, settled upon the clearing.

All about them, the roses began to change color.

—

*For the pièce de résistance of the exhibit, Opall has cast a massive sexahedron. The sculpture stands five meters high by ten by eight. Within its oversized dimensions one sees a forest landscape that encompasses earth, trees and sky.*

*The light that floods the scene fingers down in beams that are broken by the profuse growth. The trunks of the trees are strangled with roses, many a virgin white, some yellow, many pink, others a blood red. And though this seems to be the same clearing as depicted in some of the earlier bolographs, not a single rose is tinged with green.*

*As one begins to circle the massive block, the illusion of a simple landscape is dispelled. In the branches above the roses, disembodied faces begin to appear and disappear, flickering in and out with every few steps, face after face, as varied in color—red, yellow, brown, white—as the roses below, and more varied in expression. Some seem calm and at peace, their eyes closed as if in sleep. Others reflect the blissful glow of intoxication. Others are staring blankly. Still others seem to be howling in rage against the leafy prison that encloses them. Hovering above this assemblage, at the lower limits of the sky, seen only from a certain angle, but then another, and another, a larger face appears, a single enigmatic countenance that reigns like a ghostly eminence, nearly invisible among the branches . . . for its flesh is the same shade as the leaves themselves. ♦*

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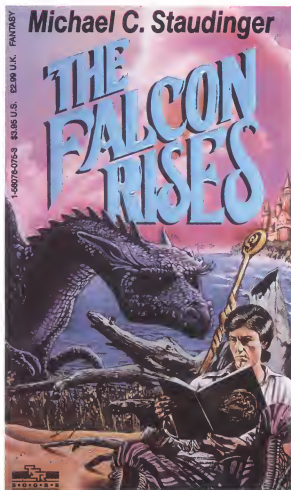
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